

# Young Families and Quakerism: Will the Center Hold?

by Tom Hoopes

Recently I was invited to help plan an adult religious education session at a meeting that expressed interest in revitalizing itself to attract and engage young families. This meeting, like so many others, recognized that young families hold the key to the future vitality of the Religious Society of Friends. This meeting is noteworthy, however, because it has begun the hard work of making some of the changes necessary to be an attractive faith community for children and young adults, as well as for its current core membership of older adults.

In starting down this path of self-reflection and conscious change, the community is taking a crucial and courageous step towards self-renewal. The footing will almost certainly be unsteady, and at times it may feel fraught with peril, but the path leads directly to the heart of our multigenerational future. Simply by being faithfully themselves, young families bring the passion, loving care, and commitment that is at the center of our shared project to build and sustain spiritual community.

Young families need Quakerism, and Quakerism needs young families. So, can we talk?

In confirming our planning meeting, I wrote an e-mail to the facilitator of the session to explain, somewhat apologetically, that the time we had selected coincided with a period when my wife and I had agreed that I would have responsibility for our spirited young children. He

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wrote back, without hesitation, “4:00 PM at the meetinghouse is perfect, and please do bring the boys. That’s what this is all about, so why wouldn’t you? I’ll check with Friends at meeting about availability to watch them.”



I replied, “I really appreciate your response to my proposal to bring the boys to our planning meeting. I realize that your question—‘Why wouldn’t you?’—was intended rhetorically, but, alas, my experience is that many Friends don’t make an effort for children to be part of the equation. So, your message of warm inclusion feels truly welcoming.”

In *The War Against Parents: What We Can Do for America’s Beleaguered Moms and Dads*, Sylvia Ann Hewlett and Cornel West write, “The project of giving new status and support to mothers and fathers has extraordinary potential because of the ways in which the parent-child bond is the most fundamental building block in human society. When this is hollowed

out, the wellspring of care and commitment dries up, and this has a huge impact beyond the home: community life shrivels up, and so does our democracy. America’s stock of social and human capital becomes dangerously depleted. If we can produce this magical parent power, we can go to the very heart of our darkness and make the center hold.”

Where does the Religious Society of Friends stand in relation to today’s “beleaguered moms and dads”? To the extent that Quaker culture has not intentionally organized itself around the needs of young families, many people of my life stage have opted out of participation in organized Quakerism. We know this from research as well as experientially, as many Friends’ own adult children—and therefore their grandchildren—are not active in a meeting community.

Of course, building multigenerational community is neither simple nor one-dimensional. Unless it has been part of a meeting’s culture, organizing things around the needs of young families can create unanticipated challenges and friction. Are we prepared to deal with the growing pains?

There is good news: Quakerism offers what lots of today’s young adults are seeking. There is now a burgeoning young adult Friends community in the Philadelphia area. The Making New Friends project of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting found that those who joined Quakerism started attending at the average age of 34. The project summarized that our outreach efforts should focus on those in their 30s and 40s. Many of those who are drawn to unprogrammed Quakerism are looking for a “tribe” that gives them a

sense of connection and belonging that resonates with their sense of who they are, and who they are becoming. (Many who take the quiz at <www.beliefnet.com> are pleased to discover that there is already a well-established religious tradition that shares their convictions! Now, all they need to do is find a Friends meeting in their area. Thank goodness for <www.quakerfinder.org>!)

This yearning for authentic community shifts to an even deeper existential level when young adults find themselves becoming parents. As has been well documented, people often seek a religious community during the early years of parenthood, because of their bone-deep hopes and fears for their children. Having children tends to evoke in us a spiritual awakening, and a connection with the Source of life. We experience the Divine through our love for our children. Contemporary culture, with its wide array of anti-spiritual messages and experiences, has only exacerbated these deep yearnings. For Quakerism to be a spiritual home of choice for today's young adult seekers, then we must meet them where they are. That is, we must offer them a community that does not simply accept

them and their children, but which proactively embraces them and nourishes them, personally and spiritually.

Families, like children, have specific developmental needs at specific life stages. In order to engage young families more successfully, meetings will do well to recognize the developmental needs that naturally accompany this particular life stage. When our faith, practice, and witness are not responsive to the developmental needs of young families, the mismatch may result in their choosing not to get involved—or not to stay involved after they experience the mismatch. Many progressively minded people in their 20s, 30s, and 40s are

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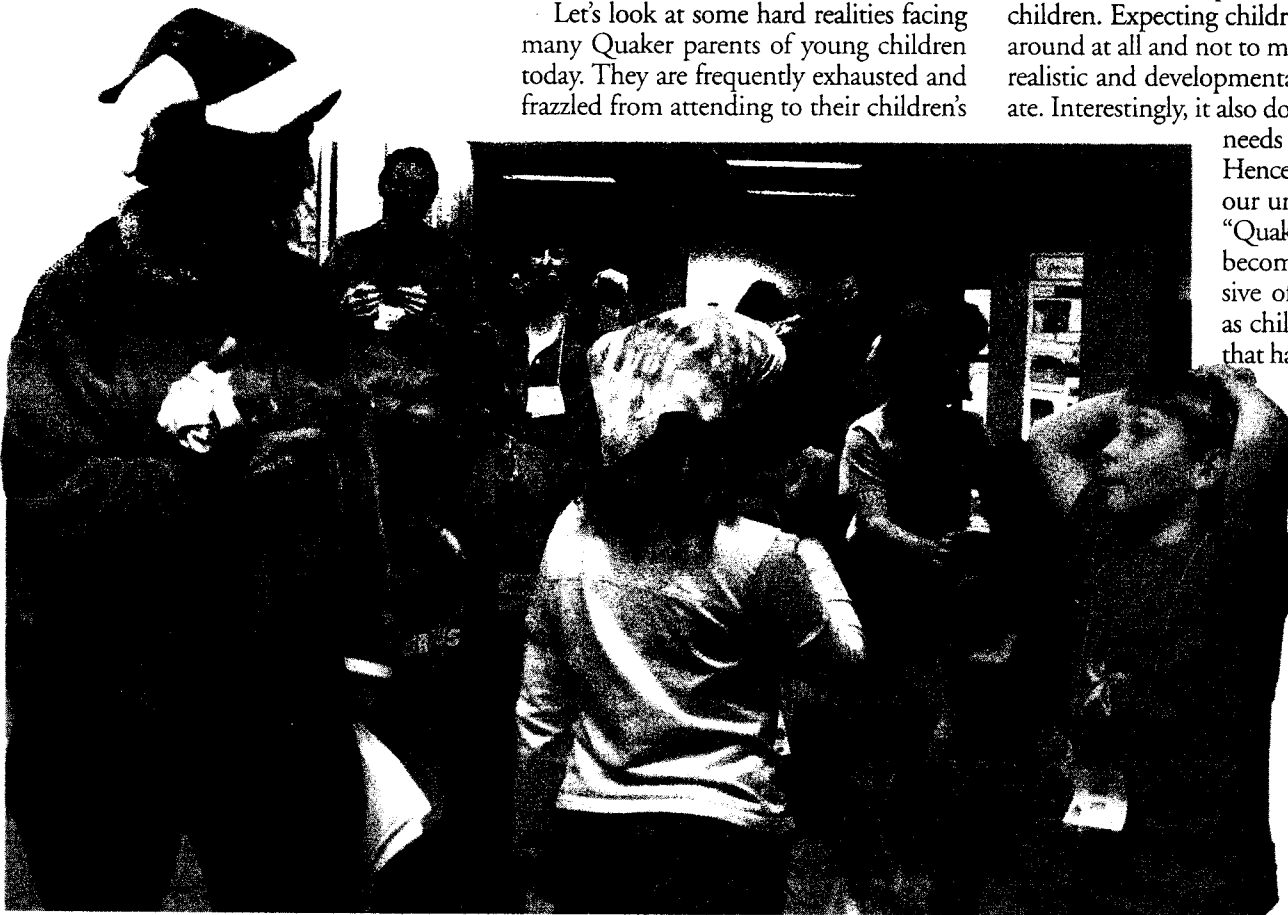
choosing to opt out of religion altogether when they do not find a faith community that meets them where they are.

Let's look at some hard realities facing many Quaker parents of young children today. They are frequently exhausted and frazzled from attending to their children's

needs in addition to their own all week long. They desperately need a break from their own children, and they may feel guilty about that fact. They are often asked—or expected—to serve as First-day school teachers or childcare providers. Hence, their experience of meeting is not one of replenishment, but of further depletion. They often lead such busy lives at home and at work that their minds are quite "noisy." The few minutes of intentional centering silence on Sunday mornings may be the only space in their lives during which they can hope to achieve interior quiet, to sustain themselves during the rest of the week. In the absence of reassurance that their children—yes, including their noise, mess, and physical exuberance—are warmly welcome, young parents may choose to skip coming to meeting altogether rather than be confronted with other adults' non-acceptance of them and their children. (This practice is an open secret among my age peers.)

Happily, the challenge of incorporating young families in the worship life of the community may be easier and more rewarding than some Friends may expect. Long periods of silent, seated worship does not meet the developmental needs of most children. Expecting children not to move around at all and not to make noise is unrealistic and developmentally inappropriate. Interestingly, it also does not meet the

needs of many adults! Hence, by broadening our understanding of "Quaker worship," we become more inclusive of adults as well as children. Meetings that have experiment-



*Joanne Clapp Fullager*

ed with introducing elements of “programmed worship” have been delighted to discover that many adults like it, too! In this way, multigenerational worship can become a natural and normal by-product of responding to the needs of young families. The whole community is thus enlivened and revitalized.

Although we claim to eschew dogma, most of our tracts implicitly posit “Quaker worship” as the practice of corporate, seated silence. While centering down into silent worship is, of course, a central aspect of Quaker spiritual practice, it is not the *only* form of Quaker worship. Indeed, contemporary Friends have found many other ways to intentionally invite and receive the presence of the Holy Spirit: singing, chanting, walking, drumming, and visual art making, just to name a few.

Happily, many meetings are “getting it right.” They have embraced the wisdom of the adage, “If you build it, they will come.” Indeed, many of the meetings that have taken pro-active measures to reorganize themselves in relation to the developmental needs of younger adults, children, and families have begun to see the gratifying outcomes of genuine multigenerational community. They have seen firsthand that there are younger people in their communities who are thirsty for what Quakerism offers, and that these people bring welcome gifts of the Spirit.

Here are some examples of pro-active measures taken by meetings to become more effectively welcoming to young families:

*Hiring an experienced early elementary or preschool teacher*—to design, organize and teach First-day school, even *before* there are many children. This upfront investment sends an unambiguous message to families who visit that they are truly welcome, and that the meeting wants them, “warts and all.”

*Creating an age-appropriate, welcoming space for young kids.* In most cases, this means a little bit of redecorating, purging some of the old stuff, and freshening up a space so that a young family comes in and thinks, “This space looks friendly!” It usually requires dedicating a room or a space to children.

*Music!* Kids love upbeat, melodic music. As it happens, so do most adults. Building a sing-along time into the routine means that *everyone* is nourished, and that people of all ages get to do the same thing together, at the same time. There is

a treasure trove of spiritually nourishing, singable music in the *FGC Hymnal* and *Rise Up Singing*.

*Snacks.* Who doesn’t like yummy food? Not only do children like snacks, they *need* them, because they burn calories faster than adults. Offering healthy, yummy snacks at all events is a good way to let young families know they are welcome. It is also a good vehicle for engaging young families in meeting, by asking them to provide the snacks.

*Providing childcare* during forums, meetings for business, and at committee meetings, offered *before* anyone asks for it. Providing childcare upon request is nice, but this approach places the burden on the young families, who will likely opt out of participation, rather than ask for “special treatment.” Committees can become a place of connection for children and adults. Inviting children (and music, games, and snacks!) into committee meetings can bring joy into this aspect of our lives.

*Older adults taking turns assisting with First-day school and childcare.* This creates an opportunity for young and old to connect with one another, and to develop their own personal relationships. I frequently hear a message of gratitude from young parents when their children are *seen* and *known* by older members of meeting. “Meeting feels like a family,” quipped one young mother to me recently.

*Encouraging and supporting young families in socializing together outside of meeting.* One salient point from the Making New Friends research project was that “people need to have a few others they know well in order to become part of the community.” Meetings can facilitate this sense of connection among and between young families, wholly apart from meeting-sponsored activities.

It is noteworthy that meeting for worship at most Friends elementary schools is structured and programmed in a way that is developmentally appropriate, as we would expect in other areas of the educational curriculum and instruction. Younger students at Friends schools are given an orientation to Quaker worship and are introduced to it slowly and deliberately, just as they are introduced to new sports or academic subjects. This often involves structured worship sharing outside of reg-

## Words

*“I love to feel where words come from.”*  
—Papunehang, quoted in *The Journal of J Woolman, 18th-century Quaker mystic*

**When my daughter was three we told her  
the name of those openings  
in the body through which we breathe:  
nostrils**

*nostrils, nostrils,  
she shrieked with a glee  
so full, so surrendered, a glee  
I’d long forgotten*

**about where words come from,  
the way they feel,  
their pure pleasure  
flooding, filling  
her small, whirling, dervish of a body**

*nostrils, nostrils*

**like light  
like music  
like God’s own breath.**

—Robin Turner

*Robin Turner lives in Terrell, Tex.*

ular meeting, as a “scaffold” to help students in learning about communion with that of God in themselves and in one another. In this way, they learn how to approach meeting for worship intentionally. Meeting for worship at a Friends school can be a remarkably transcendent experience, with scores of youngsters centering together, as they have practiced weekly for years. Many of our meetings would do well to model their orientations for new attenders—children and adults alike—on the examples of Friends schools.

Older Friends may understandably ask, “Why are the needs of today’s young families so very different than in the preceding generations?” Indeed, young adult Friend Thomas Kelly’s words from 1941, in *A Testament of Devotion*, resonate today. He writes of the quest for inner stillness within the “mad pace of our daily outer burdens,” with “our absurdly crowded calendars of appointments through which

so many pantingly and frantically gasp.” Wouldn’t Friend Thomas be amazed by the pace of today’s world, with our ubiquitous cell phones, e-mail, and long-distance work and family arrangements?

The simple fact is that young parents today are leading much busier lives than parents of an earlier generation. This is as true of Quakers as of other people. In addition to the accelerated pace of life due to new technologies, most contemporary Quaker parents are part of two-career relationships. Until recently, an implicit premise of Quaker culture was the presence of free, dedicated caregivers for the children (i.e., mothers). Due to financial necessity and changed gender roles, this is no longer an operative reality. Quaker culture is still playing catch-up to this situation. (And then there’s the matter of caring for our aging parents. But that’s a topic in itself.)

The issues raised by the prospect of building truly multigenerational community at our meetings are numerous and challenging. Young children tend to be noisy, messy, and rambunctious. Their parents are frequently stressed out, overextended, and beleaguered. Like Thomas Kelly, many of us were drawn to Quakerism because of the promise of silence and peacefulness, a haven from the noise and haste. Although we may hesitate to admit it, many of us do sometimes feel, deep down, that it would be nice if children were “seen and not heard,” like so many children in fairy tales, TV shows, and embellished memories of our own childhoods. Alas, if we want today’s young families to come to our meetings and to stay, we will do well to relinquish our desires for continuous order, tidiness, and serenity. (Ironically, my boys accompanied me to the adult session at the meeting mentioned at the beginning of this article. They sat quietly at a card table in the corner of the same room for a whole hour, intently focusing on the art and craft supplies set out for them, while I coled and my wife participated in the adult-centered discussion. We explained that such behavior was not typical, and not to be expected in the future!)

The following are some helpful queries for meetings seeking to embrace young families, and to make them an integral part of the meeting community. These emerged from the discernment and discussion at the meeting event that I mentioned at the beginning of this article:



Barbara Benton

- How can we develop a culture that welcomes children and families?
- What changes do we need to make and how might we facilitate those changes?
- How might we need to change the way we think of ourselves?
- How do we meet the needs of some older people who might be uncomfortable with young children’s behavior and needs?
- How do we communicate the challenges to Friends who may not be aware that there may be an issue with the cultural shift required?
- How can we develop an organized, creative, positive, and continuing program for children that doesn’t lay too much responsibility on very few people?
- How might we become spiritually led to commit to young families?
- How might we welcome children in the life of our meeting, including worship?

If Quakerism is to have a vital future, we will be wise to organize ourselves more intentionally around the interests and needs of young families. There may not be as many tranquil moments as some might wish, but there may be more than expected. And our expectations will continually evolve. The prospect of multigenerational Quakerism is a reality-based vision of an integrated community that is empowered, energized, and evolving. And in those places where it is already happening, the future is bright. More significantly, so is the present. □

## Congregation

In the churches of my youth,  
Mystery  
engaged the congregation,

and whatever I found  
I couldn’t explain  
to others beside me

in the polished pews.  
Not separate, though we  
thought we were,

each of us puzzled  
to be told we were blessed  
in ways we didn’t understand,

though we kept hoping  
God and our parents  
wanted us there.

—Jeanne Lohmann

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