

READING GROUP FACILITATION GUIDE

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PENDLE HILL
A Quaker Study, Retreat, and Conference Center



Outline

Overview

This guide is intended for those interested in facilitating reading groups within Quaker communities, although it may be applicable for other spiritual communities as well. The outlined process proceeds in the manner of Friends, with periods of worship and worship sharing. It includes instructions for facilitating both online and in-person reading groups. Although originally designed for use with Pendle Hill pamphlets, this process can be easily adapted for other texts.

Agenda

With this agenda, each reading group lasts about an hour and a half. There is spaciousness throughout, so there is no need to worry about keeping your group exactly on time.

0:00–0:05	Opening Worship
0:05–0:15	Welcome, Introductions, and Agenda Review
0:15–0:25	Groundlaying Activity
0:25–0:30	Worship Sharing Introduction
0:30–0:55	Worship Sharing #1 (~25 min.)
0:55–1:20	Worship Sharing #2 / Weaving (~25 min.)
1:20–1:30	Announcements & Closing Worship

Some items on this agenda may change form depending on how many people attend your reading group. In the following pages, this guide walks through each step of this agenda and details possible adjustments along the way. As your reading group continues to meet, you will discover the adaptations that best suit the dynamics of that particular group.



Preparing to Meet

Organizing Your Group

Reading groups are a site of religious education within a Quaker meeting, but they also act more generally as an opportunity for individuals to deepen their sense of membership through shared fellowship. Therefore, it is important to approach reading groups through a perspective of radical welcome. Before your reading group meets, we recommend that you:

- Clearly communicate when and where the group will meet and what it will be reading, and send a reminder with this information close to the meeting date.
- Offer both invitational communication (e.g. announcements at your monthly meeting) and internal communication (e.g. emails to previous attendees).
- Encourage attenders to read the text in advance of the meeting, but be explicit that one does not have to read the text in order to attend.
- Offer resources to aid attenders in accessing this text. Does your meeting library have copies? Is there a digital version available online? Can you lend a copy?
- Make yourself and your contact information available for those who are interested or have questions.

Selecting a Text

This guide is designed particularly for use with Pendle Hill pamphlets. The Pendle Hill pamphlet series offers many short, accessible texts across a wide range of subjects. For reading lists, sets, an index, and other helpful information on selecting a pamphlet that aligns with the interests or focus of your reading group, visit <https://pendlehill.org/learn/pamphlets-books/>.

Of course, this guide can easily be adapted for use with other texts as well. The Inward Light Library (<https://inwardlight.org/>), the Quaker Religious Education Collaborative (<https://quakerrecollaborative.org/resource/friendly-reading-list>), and C. Wess Daniels (<https://www.gatheringinlight.com/quakerism-101-a-very-basic-introduction-with-suggested-readings/>) all offer great suggestions for Quaker texts. If you choose a longer text, it may be advisable to select only an excerpt or a chapter to make it more accessible to the group.

Preparing Your Materials

Before meeting, you will need to prepare a few materials, including: a check-in question, a groundlaying activity, instructions for worship sharing, queries, and any closing announcements.

If your reading group meets in-person, it may be helpful to print out some of these materials, such as the queries. If your reading group meets online, we recommend collecting all of this information in a document so that you can paste the relevant information into the meeting chat when your group arrives at each item.

Templates for these materials can be found [here](#).



Opening Worship, Welcome, and Groundlaying

Opening Worship

The centering silence at the beginning of the reading group has two purposes: it grounds the space, and it allows time for latecomers to trickle in. This time can be shortened or extended by a few minutes depending on what the dynamics of your group calls for.

If your reading group is meeting online, it can be helpful to paste in the chat a message such as: “Welcome Friends. We are settling into worshipful silence and will begin five minutes past the hour.”

Welcome, Introductions, and Agenda Review

After opening worship, you may welcome everyone to the space and begin with introductions. We recommend inviting each attendee to share their name, their pronouns (if they so wish), how they are arriving today, and their response to a check-in question.

A check-in question allows attendees to get a little deeper with each other. It could be the same question for every meeting, such as, “What is one thing bringing you joy at this time?” or it could change from meeting to meeting. The question could address a seasonal change: “What are you looking forward to in the spring?” The check-in question could also be bridge to the text; for Pendle Hill’s reading group on the pamphlet *Deep Hospitality*, the question was, “What is one things that helps you to feel welcome?”

Introductions and check-ins should last around ten minutes. If you have a larger group, it may be useful to ask attendees to keep their introductions relatively brief. After introductions, it can be helpful to briefly review the agenda for the reading group’s time together before moving on to the groundlaying activity.

Groundlaying Activity

A groundlaying activity establishes a common foundation of knowledge for the reading group. In some ways, the text already serves as this foundation, but not every attendee may have read all or even some of the text. A brief (approximately 10-minute) activity can therefore provide these attendees with a entrance into participation. This activity could take many different forms; it could be the same for each meeting, or it could change. Some ideas include:

- A 1–3 page sheet with the key passages, terms, and ideas of the text summarized. You might ask participants to read this and invite any questions, additions, or differing perspectives on the text. An example summary sheet is included at the end of this document.
- A video which is related to the text (this could be shared via screenshare if online).
- If your group reliably has several attendees who do fully read the text, you can invite attendees to share their favorite passages from the text and what spoke to them about these passages.



Worship Sharing and Discussion

Introducing Worship Sharing

Even if your entire group is familiar with worship sharing, it is often still worthwhile to review the general principles of this format before beginning. “Worship sharing focuses on a particular question and helps us to explore our own experience and share with each other more deeply than we would in normal conversation. It seeks to draw us into sacred space, where we can take down our usual defenses, and encounter each other in ‘that which is eternal.’” The queries of worship sharing are a starting point, not a constraint; everyone has the option to answer a different query that better fits them. During worship sharing, participants:

- Reach as deeply as they can into the sacred center of their life.
- Speak out of worshipful silence, and leave a period of silence between speakers.
- **Speak from their own experience, about their own experience.** Concentrate on feelings and changes rather than on thoughts or theories.
- Do not respond to what anyone else has said, either to praise or to refute.
- Listen carefully and deeply to what is spoken.
- Expect to speak only once, until everyone has had a chance to speak.
- Indicate that they are passing if they are not called to speak.
- Respect the confidentiality of what is shared.

This information is abridged from [FGC’s worship sharing guidelines](#).

Note: if you have a particularly talkative group, worship sharing may naturally evolve into a free-flowing discussion. This is not necessarily a problem! It could simply be a sign of what works best for your group.

Worship Sharing/Discussion Sessions & Queries

Pendle Hill’s reading group ranges from 15–30 participants and has ~50 minutes for worship sharing. For the first 25 minutes, the group is divided into groups of 4–6 for small group worship sharing (this can be done via breakout rooms over Zoom). Smaller groups allow for more people to share in the same amount of time, and they are often a more comfortable setting for shyer attendees to participate in. Pendle Hill’s queries for small group worship sharing are:

- What brought you here tonight? What spoke to you about this pamphlet?
- Do you have a favorite passage?
- How did the ideas in this pamphlet intersect with your spiritual journey right now? What resonated with your own life and experience?

For the last 25 minutes, the group comes back together for large group worship sharing. The queries for this session are typically more specific to the text, often drawn from the discussion questions at the back of most newer Pendle Hill pamphlets.

If your reading group consists of 4–6 participants, it may not make sense to break into small groups. In this case, the whole group could be together for all 50 minutes, with the second set of queries introduced at the 25-minute mark. If your group’s dynamic benefits from time for more active conversation, the first half of the time could be spent in worship sharing, and the second half could open up for ‘weaving’: free-form sharing of observations, questions, interpretations, and discussion.



Closing

Announcements

Depending on the context of your particular reading group, it may make sense at the end to announce the text for the next meeting. Alternatively, you might spend some time at the end to deliberate with the attendees and what the next text should be. At this time, you may also wish to collect the email addresses of participants in order to notify them of future reading group meetings.

Furthermore, the closing of the reading group can support the larger community; you and the other participants might share announcements about upcoming events happening in the meeting or their own lives.

Closing Worship

Like opening worship, closing worship can stretch or shrink to fill whatever time is left at the end. As a general principle, the timing and even content of the agenda should change to suit the dynamics of the reading group, and not the other way around.

Thanks to the generous support of the Friends Foundation for the Aging, we're able to make this and other free, online resources and programs accessible to f/Friends of all ages.





Four Doors to Meeting for Worship

by William Taber

This is a sample summary sheet for Pendle Hill pamphlet #306, Four Doors to Meeting for Worship by William Taber. Preparing a sheet like this for your reading group's text can make the group more accessible for participants who were not able to read much in advance.

Introduction

"Some people 'find it' almost instantly when they attend their first Friends meeting for worship; as they settle into the silence **they feel themselves gathered into a living Presence and they know they have come home at last**" (3).

"A key to understanding Quaker worship at its best is to remember that the culmination and focus of Christian worship has almost always been the act of communion. The writings of George Fox and many other Friends all point to communion as central to Quaker worship. Although there was much preaching in the early Quaker meetings, it was all to one purpose: 'to take the hearers to Christ and leave them there'... The heart of worship is communion with this invisible but eternal stream of reality in which is the living and eternal Christ" (3-4).

The Door Before

"Earlier Friends often went through the Door Before many times a week so that when they took their seats for Sunday or midweek meeting they were already deeply prepared for entering the familiar and living Stream" (5).

"A person who has already experienced times of spiritual nourishment during the week will require less time to let go of the rhythms and preoccupations of normal life and can therefore enter more quickly and easily into full attention to the living Presence, to the Stream which is always here. **If the Sunday meeting for worship is our only haven of peace and quiet during the week, the luxury of that silent, private space can become so precious that we may even resent spoken ministry -- especially if that ministry seems inappropriate to us -- so that we may feel unfulfilled and frustrated when the meeting is over**" (5).

"When even just a few meeting attenders have regularly gone through the Door Before, the entire meeting tends to settle more easily into the deep and living quiet which Friends have long called a 'gathered' meeting" (5).

"Only after several weeks or months may you one day look back on the quality of your life and realize that you are handling crises and frustrations somewhat better than before, and you may begin to be aware of having a more ready access to a center of peace and discernment in the midst of your busy life" (9).



The Door Inward

“...Most ‘gathered’ meetings for worship actually begin long before the official starting time, at least for a few of the attenders who are there” (11).

“If we can touch for a few moments the holy harmony of the stream tonight, God’s silent music can echo subtly through our consciousness all night long, attuning us so that we can step more quickly and confidently through the Door Inward when we arrive at meeting tomorrow” (11).

“Entering the door of the meeting room can be a very special experience of going through the Door Inward; it can be a ‘body prayer’ as we continue to let body, mind, and spiritual senses seek attunement with the Stream in this holy place as we move toward a seat. **(The holy place is not the meeting room -- it is the convergence of willing souls with the Stream, which can occur anywhere, anytime)**” (12).

“...A Quaker meeting requires each worshiper... To give the same kind of loving focused attention on the transition from one level of consciousness to another [the expanded consciousness of worship]” (13).

“Friends may use a variety of methods... Most approaches include three important qualities. The first is desire, a profound yearning to be in the Presence... The second is focus. Whatever technique or lack of technique people may use during these opening moments of worship, they all aim toward a relaxed, alert attentiveness in the presence of God. And the third is trust, a synonym of faith, for it takes trust to out into the deep water; it takes trust to let go and rest or float in the deep and Living Water of the Stream” (13).

“While a few of these techniques may be helpful to some people... most eventually come to realize that as **we learn to relax our anxiety to do the right thing, and as we learn what it feels like just to be present, then technique becomes far less important than our desire to be fully present**” (16).

The Door Within

“This experience of being united with a group which is ‘waiting upon the Lord’ can be described in many ways.... For many people it feels like having been lifted or expanded into another state of consciousness which enjoys an inward, effortless quietness. At the same time the mind slows down into a reverie-like state... when time drops away or becomes irrelevant” (17).

“**In this living Presence it becomes safe for the ego to relax, allowing us to realize that the sharp boundaries of the self can become blurred and blended as we feel ourselves more and more united** with fellow worshipers and with the Spirit of God” (18).

“**If an unpleasant awareness of some discontinuity in our lives keeps emerging into the peace of the meeting, it is probably a sign that we need to pay attention to it, for at least a few minutes, with the quiet, expanded attentiveness characteristic of the state of consciousness of the gathered meeting.** We can just let go and contemplate the painful reality as the Light reveals it to us... In this more expansive, less judgmental state of consciousness we may gradually become aware of new dimensions, or causes, or outcomes of the problem as we continue to hold it in the Light” (19-20).

“**Thus, the ultimate test of our response to the Inward Work of Christ lies not in the way we feel during the meeting for worship, but in the way we relate afterward to our fellow humans and to all things in God’s Creation.** Eventually this sensitivity to the ‘new’ logic of spiritual cause and effect may allow the seed of a ‘leading’ to emerge, so that we may find ourselves irrevocably led, as the meeting proceeds, to consider how to make some significant change in personal behavior, or we may find ourselves ‘under concern’ to devote time



and energy to some need in meeting or the community or nation or world" (21).

"As the meeting continues in this gathered, receptive state, someone may be moved to rise and speak a few words or offer a prayer. If we allow the 'magic' of the gathered meeting to do its work in us, even our listening takes on a different quality as we absorb the words rather than merely hearing and reacting to them. It is not uncommon for the message to parallel or to complement our own stream or thought or for it to speak directly to some problem or question within us. Perhaps the message may help to gather and focus us so that we may enter even more deeply into the transforming communion which surrounds us. Sometimes the message is difficult to hear; perhaps the speaker is saying something we would rather not think about. Yet, if we absorb the words rather than react to them, we may discover that God is using these words to open us to some blind spot or prejudice or lack of faithfulness..." (21-22).

"How can... anyone who feels led to speak in a meeting be sure that we are not speaking too often, or too long, or from our own ideas? ...The most sure way is to make certain that we are speaking out of that special state of consciousness of the Door Within, that multiple meshing when we feel ourselves united both with fellow worshipers and with the Divine. As we become experienced... it gradually becomes easier to discern between the many subtle pressures to speak and an authentic Divine urging to be a channel for a message. The traditional signs which accompany an authentic leading to speak are rapid breathing, rapid beating of the heart and sometimes a trembling... a response to the inward motion of the Spirit" (23).

"...the inward motion can lead to many God-called activities other than speaking in meeting. Only a few people can expect to be led to speak in any given meeting, but each faithful Friend can expect, in time, to learn the difference between the true inward motion and other motivations to act. This attention to Holy Spirit guidance in daily life becomes very important, since each day is filled with innumerable choices, many of them apparently equally good -- until the inward motion helps us discern, even in "little" things" (24).

"...The inconspicuous, invisible ministry of people who may never speak in meeting is often more important than the spoken ministry! This 'invisible ministry' helps the meeting reach that state of consciousness in which minds and hearts and wills are opened and united so that the work of God may go on among us" (25).

The Door Beyond

"...This privileged experience of nourishing oneness must end sometime, and we must proceed through the Door Beyond, shifting back to the more 'normal' state of everyday consciousness. Even as the levels of consciousness begin to shift, we know that there are consequences from our having been there. Perhaps we shall discover an increased flexibility as we return to the world outside of the meetinghouse. **Perhaps the 'normal' world will seem more beautiful, more full of possibilities because we have been given a clever, keener focus, a more accurate way of seeing what is really there."** (26).

"...the meeting is of little value unless we can carry its blessing with us into our life in the world. No matter how exalted our experience in meeting may have been, it was never intended to be 'just a trip'... without reference to the quality of our daily life and witness in the week to come. So, when the hands are shaken, those few moment of passing through the Door Beyond have enormous potential for transforming the grace of a gathered communion into the grace of a transformed life." (27).