



## **Quaker Listening Space - Overview**

### **What is a listening space?**

A listening space is a group activity where people come together in a facilitated space to share experiences and thoughts with others to gain a better appreciation of a situation or topic.

The purpose of a listening space is to gain better and wider understanding, not to make decisions, find solutions or hold a debate. A listening space can be part of a decision-making process, but its goal is to provide a space for everyone to be heard in a safe environment.

### **Why it's needed**

In our Quaker Meetings we spend the majority of our time in Meeting for Worship or making decisions in Business Meetings. During Restoring Relations' work with Meetings experiencing damaging conflict we have repeatedly heard that their Meetings rarely provide opportunities for people to simply come together in a safe place to share their experiences and connect with others.

### **How it works**

A listening space works by first creating a safe space in which everyone is able to contribute fully. A safe space does not necessarily equate to a comfortable space. Our understanding can grow from hearing points of view we do not share. Creating a safe space involves establishing practices that a group will use, which develop as the group evolves.

In the beginning, the space is usually facilitated by external facilitators. The facilitators create an environment where people speak and listen. Over time, everyone is encouraged to act as a facilitator and the group becomes self-facilitating.

Good listening is expansive and there is no attempt to narrow things down to make them simple. The group's purpose is to explore a situation or topic, not to make decisions or provide solutions, no matter how complex or messy things become.

## **How is it different to other Quaker practices?**

Some of the practices employed in a listening space are found in other Quaker approaches; the use of silence and listening for instance. However, there are clear differences;

- Overtly establishing and maintaining a safe space, rather than assuming a space is safe for everyone.
- Maintaining curiosity and allowing a topic to expand, without the desire to reach a conclusion or make a decision.
- Wishing to hear from everyone, irrespective of whether what they say has been heard previously. Wishing to hear and value their experience and contribution.
- A facilitated space, maybe initially by external facilitators and later by members of the group, formally or informally.

## **When is it used?**

A Listening Space can be used in any situation where a better understanding of a situation is needed, where alternative points of view are to be explored and where greater connection between individuals is desired. Uses include;

- Where individuals have a diverse range of experiences which are preventing connection between people. For example, many Meetings are struggling to come together fully after the pandemic, as individual experiences and needs may be wide and varied.
- To explore a complex situation, maybe as part of a decision-making process. A listening space is not used for making a decision, but is an aid to discernment, helping to better understand and appreciate contributing factors.
- In an emotionally charged situation when we struggle to hear one another because we react, reverting to black and white thinking.
- Where a Meeting is experiencing disagreement or early signs of conflict. If people can sit together in a safe place and express their points of view or share their experiences damaging conflict can sometimes be avoided.
- As an aid to healing. A listening space is not therapy, but it can bring healing after traumatic events.
- In a world where views seem to be growing more polarised, holding a space where diverse points of view can be safely expressed and heard is an opportunity for Quaker Meetings to reach out to their communities as a form of outreach.

## **Why does it work?**

Listening Spaces work because they satisfy a number of our basic human needs. We all have a need, in varying degrees, to;

- Be treated equally, with everyone having an opportunity to speak and be heard.
- To be safe, knowing that whatever experiences and thoughts are shared we will not be judged or attacked.
- To connect with others at a deeper level.
- To be part of a community where we are accepted as we are.
- To have an opportunity to grow and develop.