For Friends, the inward and corporate experience of God is the starting point of Faith.

This radical reliance on inward experience can lead, as it did for the fledgling movement of the Children of the Light, into some instances of hero worship, internal division, public scandal, and increased attention from wary authorities. Then and now, the survival of the movement depends on moderating the exuberance of some and testing the leadings of individual Friends against several benchmarks, including:

- group discernment and oversight,
- the tradition and experience of Friends,
- the fruits of the Spirit, and
- Christian scripture and religious writings

Any open search for Truth must identify its sources of authority. For Friends, individual experience is primary, but must be tested against these others. In the current day, these yardsticks are applied in ways that are unique to Friends. The local Friends’ community provides a stimulus and a check on inward experience; Queries and Advices are sources for Quaker tradition and experience, and religious writings provide a broader perspective.

**Corporate Discernment.** The experience with God is both individual and corporate. The meeting is not only a check but a stimulus to Friends’ explorations with the Light. Through worship together, ministry in worship, group interaction for discussion and discernment, and daily interaction, individuals teach the meeting and the meeting molds and teaches individuals. Light comes to us both directly from God and mediated through the meeting as a whole.

**Testimonies, Advices, Queries.** While Friends do not rely on creeds and dogma, there are guides to follow and to measure against. “Testimonies” are not just statements of central ethical principles, but are outward manifestations of inner transformation which grows out of a living relationship with the Divine. Friends use testimonies as guides and as measuring-sticks in their lives as individuals, as families, and as meetings. The testimonies have been committed to writing in different ways by different groups of Friends. Among independent Friends, five central testimonies are often outlined: Integrity, Community, Harmony, Equality, and Simplicity. These are described in more depth in Chapter 4.

“Advices” are written reminders of what a life lived in the Spirit might look like. The first general advices were adopted in 1791. Friends in various Yearly Meetings have adapted and revised them periodically since then. Some advices are straightforward suggestions about specific issues of concern to Friends at a particular time; some are
wide-ranging challenges for all time.

Only a few years after its founding in England, Friends began to use “queries” to ascertain the state of the Society as a whole. The first Yearly Meeting questions to the monthly meetings reflect statistical and practical as well as spiritual concerns:

- Which Friends in service to the Society, in their respective regions, departed this life since the last Yearly Meeting?
- Which Friends, imprisoned on account of their testimony, died in prison since the last Yearly Meeting?
- How among Friends did Truth advance since last Yearly Meeting and how do they fare in relation to peace and unity?

By 1700 the practice of monthly meetings answering in writing had begun. The list of queries soon was enlarged to make inquiries concerning the conduct of meetings. Over time, advices and queries were developed on discipline, evangelical soundness, moral and spiritual instruction, social responsibility, and ministry. Thus the advices and queries represent a continuing exploration of a common faith and practice.

The advices and queries are a reminder of the basic faith and principles held to be essential to the life and witness of the Religious Society of Friends. Individually and in meetings, Friends consider how the advices and queries affect them personally, and where they are called to service. Friends may be disheartened at times because the ideal of Christian discipleship seems impossibly demanding. All should remember that we are to seek it, not with our own strength, but with the strength of the Guide whom we follow.

The advices and queries are intended for use in Monthly Meetings as well as for personal devotions. Their use varies in Meetings according to the needs of the members. Many Meetings read and consider one or several of the queries, with appropriate advices or other material, once a month during meetings for business or in other meetings. Some meetings record the united response of the meeting as a whole to the queries, others record responses of those in attendance. In different circumstances a meeting may be led to record one or the other. Meeting committees may find certain queries helpful in evaluating their activities. Meetings often publish the queries regularly in their newsletters. They offer a basis for Monthly Meeting’s annual report on the state of the Society. The reader will find advices and queries on specific topics throughout the next two chapters.

**Scripture.** Friends find the Jewish and Christian writings which make up the Bible to be a rich and sustaining source of inspiration and a record of God’s revelation over many centuries. The Quaker movement began at a time when the Bible had recently come into wide circulation in England, and Friends drew greatly from it. George Fox and other early traveling ministers knew the Bible well, studied it earnestly, and quoted it often.

The inspiration of the scriptures was affirmed, but the early Friends also emphasized a distinction which has remained important to this day. In Henry Cadbury’s words, “Divine revelation was not confined to the past. The same Holy Spirit which had inspired the scriptures in the past could inspire living believers centuries later. Indeed, for the right understanding of the past, the present insight from the same Spirit was essential.” Thus, in emphasizing the power which gave forth the scriptures and the accessibility of this
same power to us today, Friends have avoided making written records alone a final or infallible test. Instead they are invited to be drawn into that same Spirit which gave forth the Bible, both in order to understand its contents and to be led in a continually maturing discovery of the ways of God. Such discovery is fostered through the study, contemplation, and work of each individual, and these private acts of devotion and service in turn prepare one for the experience of corporate worship.

Names. The name, the Religious Society of Friends, finds its source in Jesus’ statement that “You are my friends, if you do what I command you. I shall not call you servants any more, because a servant does not know his master’s business; I call you friends, because I have made known to you everything I have learnt from my Father.” (John 15:14-15) The inseparability of faith and practice is a truth which pervades both past and present of the Quaker movement.

Over the centuries, Friends have used many words and phrases to describe the divine life and power at the heart of the universe: the Holy Spirit, the Light Within, the Inward (or Inner) Light, the Light of Christ, Christ Within, God, the Living God, Lord, the Word, the Truth, Power, the Seed, True Silence, Divine Spirit, the Eternal, the Divine Principle, Grace, Presence, and others. All such terms are weak attempts to express the inexpressible. The diversity of words and phrases reflects the diversity of beliefs and variety of experiences among Friends.

Sacraments and Creeds. The absence of outward rites and ceremonies in Quaker worship is both a fruit of the primacy of inward experience and a stimulus for it. Friends seek to view all of life as sacramental. Desiring to avoid symbolism that may tend to supplant substance, Friends do not observe outward sacraments, such as water baptism or bread and wine communion.

Similarly, Friends do not rely on formal statements of belief. Adherence to a creed is not a test of faith or the measure of suitability for membership. The lack of a creed has sometimes led to the misconception that Friends do not have beliefs, or that one can believe anything and be a Friend. However, most Quakers take the absence of a creed as an invitation and encouragement to exercise an extra measure of personal responsibility for the articulation of faith. Rather than rely on priests or professional theologians, each believer is encouraged to take seriously the personal disciplines which enable spiritual transformation. Out of lives of reflection, prayer, faithfulness, and service flow the statements of belief, both in word and in deed, which belong to Friends.

*It is not opinion, or speculation, or notions of what is true, or assent to or the subscription of articles and propositions, though never so soundly worded, that ... makes a man a true believer or true Christian. But it is a conformity of mind and practice to the will of God, in all holiness of conversation, according to the dictates of this Divine principle of Light and Life in the soul which denotes a person truly a child of God.*

*William Penn, 1692*

Friends’ Place in Christianity. Whether one interprets the Quaker movement as a strand within Protestantism or as a third force distinct from both Protestantism and Catholicism, the movement, both in its origin and in the various branches which have evolved, is rooted in Christianity. However, from its inception it has offered both a
critique of many accepted manifestations of Christianity and an empathy with people of faith beyond the bounds of Christianity. Some Friends have placed particular emphasis on the Gospel of Jesus Christ, while others have found more compelling a universal perspective emphasizing the Divine Light enlightening every person. One of the lessons of Friends’ history as a religious movement is that an excessive reliance on one or the other of these perspectives, neglecting the essential unity of the two, has been needlessly divisive and has diminished the vitality of the Quaker vision.

The concern of Friends is not that members affirm a particular verbal formulation of this faith but that it be a living and transforming power within their lives. Challenged by the words of Jesus as quoted in Matthew 7:21—“It is not those who say to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ who will enter the kingdom of heaven, but those who do the will of my Father in heaven”—Friends do not place emphasis on the naming of God. Instead each is encouraged, in John Woolman’s phrase, “to distinguish the language of the pure Spirit which inwardly moves upon the heart.” In the course of following this spiritual path, many Friends do come to find great depths of meaning in familiar Christian concepts and language, while others do not. Although sometimes perplexing to the casual observer, this phenomenon does not trouble many seasoned Friends who have discovered a deep unity with one another in the Spirit.

For many, the way Friends speak of faith and the diversity of belief found among them may be perplexing. Even those who have been among Friends for a while may find it challenging to sort out Quaker theology. This difficulty arises in part from the fact that the Society of Friends is not a single, homogeneous group but a large spiritual family with several branches that have evolved in different directions over the past three centuries.

As one reads Quaker literature, of which this Faith and Practice contains only a small sampling, patterns of belief appear. But it is only in careful, sustained observation of Friends’ work and ministry as individuals and as a community that an understanding of the underpinning faith emerges with fullness and clarity. The brief generalizations offered here are no substitute for thorough study and reflection; at best they offer a few signposts which will draw one into a richer journey and remind one of deeper insights.