

Yearly Meeting Gathering 2014 held at the University of Bath

Introduction to session summing up what it means to be a Quaker today

It is daunting to try to sum up three years' consideration of what it means to be a Quaker today when we know that the experience is different for each of the 2,000 adults and children at the YMG let alone for every one of the 13,735 members and 8,495 listed attenders of BYM!

Yet while everyone's story is different, there is an embracing of the wholeness that is important even if each one of us is only engaged in parts of the Society of Friends at any time. To borrow from Ben Pink Dandelion's lecture, our insights are inherently collective and we are a do-it-together religion.

Being a Quaker today is more than a liking for fuzziness. The Quaker business method is anything but fuzzy. Agreeing minutes within the meeting forces a clarity that many secular organisations can only achieve by subsequent editing! And the discipline of the discernment process to find the truth for the community is something that most of us cling to - even if we do not always carry it out as well as we could if we followed the red book more closely.

For the twenty first century Quaker, there is often a struggle between the wish to follow our own path and the need to be in discipline. In one of the under 11 groups, a young Friend spoke with disarming honesty of his conscience as 'the little voice in my ear that I don't listen to' while several Friends talked of how hard it is to 'Give over thine own willing' and the application for membership being an acceptance of that.

We are on a journey together that is rooted in our worshipping groups. Usually this is primarily at Local Meeting, for many supplemented at AM, nationally and sometimes in the wider world of Friends while - for many young Friends in particular - the main worshipping group is not geographically defined. Sometimes we struggle with words on our journey together and we know we need to respect each other's integrity and exercise deep listening to be able to work together in the world attending to everyone's suffering with love and "answering that of God" in everyone we meet.

Our worshipping groups - the quality of the spiritual experience within them and the nurture of the individuals who come to the meetings - is core. We try to offer love to all who come whether they decide that the journey with Quakers is for one meeting (or for my meeting in Westminster where we have a lot of passing trade sometimes 5 minutes!) or for decades as an Attender or Member (more on that later).

Creating and maintaining a community is hard. Friends have spoken of the burden of work that falls on some or the pain of feeling that the gift of service has not been given to them. Many sessions at this YMG have showcased the people, practices, workshops and materials

available for us to draw on including the soon-to-be launched 'Being Friends together' materials from Quaker Life and Woodbrooke.

Though in plenary our focus this year has been inward, the Groups Fair, Special Interest Groups and many of the journey threads highlight the extent to which being a Quaker today means being active in the world – and we have heard of the variety of witness taking place, sometimes in the name of Quakers and sometimes through our job choices. This has been reflected in our worship, where the people of Gaza as well as asylum seekers and others living in poverty in our country have been held in the light. Jan Ariens' introduction yesterday to the theme for 2015-2017 of 'Living our faith in the world' showed that this is really all one and opened the way for our consideration of this part of being a Quaker today over the coming years.

Part, but by no means all, of the question of what it means to be a Quaker today concerns the institution and processes of, and the significance accorded to membership. As a religious group we reject the outward sacraments, and are led to proclaim that all of life is sacred. On the same basis, all congregation in meeting for worship is sacred, and many of us do draw a distinction between spiritual membership of a Quaker community, which may begin from the first moment one sits in a meeting for worship, and practical membership of an organisation, which may come about some months or years later. We were reminded of the beginning of Chapter 11 of Quaker Faith and Practice, which points out that for early Friends a hunger for direct experience of the divine was the only prerequisite to being part of the movement.

We heard about many journeys through, into, out of, and sometimes back again into, membership. Some Friends explained that while they had had time away from meetings, their continuing membership allowed them to feel part of the community, so that you could nonetheless cut them like a stick of rock, and find a Quaker Q in the middle.

Some Friends spoke of their joy and thankfulness at being members, and some felt that membership had deepened their commitment to their Quakerism, to their meeting and to the wider family of Friends (sometimes to their surprise). Other Friends, mainly Attenders, felt that their commitment was amply evident through their attendance and service to their meeting, and that further evidence of commitment was not required. Many members note that taking membership is no final destination, but merely another step on a journey. We were reminded that there was a risk of a perception of exclusivity and a two-tier system in using the terms Members and Attenders. However we were glad to hear many voices saying that such a distinction did not play a part in their local meetings.

Likening membership to marriage, wherein an existing connection is recognised, made public and deepened, was helpful for many, but not all, Friends.

Based on the responses that we received, it seems that Friends wish for adjustments to the membership process, rather than the removal of that process. We urge Friends to read Chapter 11 – and particularly 11:04-11:11 – to understand the possibilities that are already available to Area Meetings. We recognise, however, that our current handling of membership does not adequately provide for some Friends, and that greater flexibility and a more tender use of language might enable some to consider the issue in a new light. In particular, we have heard a need for a more flexible approach to membership for young adult Friends, whose journeys may preclude them from committing to a local or area meeting. Friends wondered whether Young Friends' General Meeting could be allowed to accept young adult friends into membership of BYM in a similar way to an Area Meeting.

Some Friends felt that becoming a member was not possible for them because it represented something they couldn't live up to. We would refer them to the words of Edgar G Dunstan in Quaker Faith and Practice chapter 11 – *“Our membership is never based upon worthiness...we none of us are members because we have attained a certain standard of goodness, but rather because, in this matter, we still are all humble learners in the school of Christ. Our membership is of no importance whatever, unless it signifies that we are committed to something of far greater and more lasting significance than can adequately be conveyed by the closest association with any movement or organisation”*.

Friends; a controversial subject – Quaker jobs. Or service, which is perhaps a more helpful term. Many people saw a link between their being a member or attender, and the jobs they could be asked to do (and also the jobs they could reasonably turn down!), and it is true that currently, certain voluntary roles (although a decreasing number) require a Member to fill them.

Most if not all meetings rely on, and delight in, the gifts and leadings of both members and attenders, and it is clear from responses that many attenders play an extremely full part in the life of many meetings. In such circumstances, both meetings and attenders are called to take responsibility for having frank and caring conversations about membership which can be initiated by elders or by attenders as appropriate, and for understanding the reasons for which certain Friends may prefer to remain outside of membership. We were encouraged by the Friends who found that membership meant that when asked to undertake certain roles, they found themselves to be able where they had not felt they would be.

In short, as Marisa Johnson reminded us if it quacks, it is probably a Quaker. And as JYM taught us in epilogue on Tuesday, if it is flying in the same direction as you, honking loudly to encourage you on your journey, then you should make sure you are doing the same for it and the rest of the group. And if it flies off in another direction altogether because it doesn't like where the group is heading, that is also fine, we are not called to be all things to all geese.

Siobhan Haire and Caroline Nurse, 8 August 2014