

A journey into service - reflections on Meeting for Sufferings(MfS), December 2015

This meeting was spread over a weekend at Woodbrooke. We got through a great deal of business but it was also time for worship, fellowship, eating together and building a sense of community. The use of base groups meant I was able to get to know better the representatives from the other Area Meetings(AM) across East Anglia.

As usual, a set of the papers, including the minutes, can be found on the Quaker.org website at <http://www.quaker.org.uk/our-organisation/meeting-for-sufferings/papers-and-minutes>. There is a lot to digest - it runs to 181 pages - so I have decided to make this report a personal reflection, hoping it gives you an insight into the spirit of the meeting as well as highlighting some of the key issues.

I came away with an enhanced sense of what it means to be a member of the Religious Society of Friends - to be a Quaker. I joined the Society here in Colchester. That makes me, formally, a member of Southern East Anglia AM, but my membership goes beyond here. I see myself as part of the community of Quakers across the UK - Britain Yearly Meeting (BYM). It doesn't stop there either. I feel part of the world-wide community of Quakers. We received reports from Yearly Meetings abroad which we were urged to relay to our own AMs. They're all in the papers but if I was to pick out one it would be from Switzerland Yearly Meeting (at around page 100) which I found especially moving. I've attached it to this report.

I've titled this report a journey into service. This is because, for me, this is what it feels like to be a Quaker. In many ways it has been a natural extension of my working life. Others may feel the same - I recall conversations I had about this with our recently departed Friend Alison Bush. For others, membership may be an opportunity to serve, possibly for the first time. Service for some Friends may necessarily be bound by their Local Meeting. For others it might extend to the Area Meeting. Yet others might be drawn to serve nationally, on one of the BYM central committees, for example. Some Friends may be led to serve overseas, as part of that worldwide community of Friends. Our Area, in fact, has something of a tradition of Friends going out into the world. Colchester Meeting heard recently from Jez Smith, Clerk to Geneva Meeting, who began his journey here.

The route into service is not the same for all Friends. Journeys are based on gifts and leadings, circumstances, and sense of readiness. Not all Friends are aware they could serve on one of the central committees. To help tap into this nationwide pool of talent, the way the Central Nomination Committee works is being reviewed. More detail can be found in the papers. It is hoped this will be a two way process. AMs and their nominations committees are encouraged to think about the service a person could do beyond the AM boundaries. At the very least Friends are urged to complete the Quaker Service Information Form. This can be found at <http://old.quaker.org.uk/quaker-service-information-form>

Membership is also about entering the life of the Society - becoming part of Quaker life. We heard about the work of the Quaker Life Central Committee which supports and strengthens us. This covers faith and practice, both spiritual nurture and the practical tasks required for the running of our Quaker meetings. The work of Quaker Life (QL) is being reviewed too, with a renewed focus on helping those Friends embarking on the journey: how can their journeys, based on their gifts and leadings, be enabled nurtured, supported, and sustained. To this end, QL has developed, and is continuing to develop, resources to help us. Being Friends Together is an example. See <http://together.woodbrooke.org.uk/welcome.php>

As a key part of this, there is a keenness for Friends - and Attenders- to know more about our book of discipline, Quaker Faith and Practice (QFP). Reading it would be a good place start! A reading programme has been developed - it's not too late to catch-up - and can be found at <http://qfp.quaker.org.uk/reading/>. Locally, Colchester is poised to start a Qfp study group.

When you start to read QFP it doesn't take long to see why it's called our book of discipline. Like many complex organisations, and the Society of Friends is no exception, we are bound together by a shared way of doing things, in our case honed over 350 years. In some instances - and there is no way of skirting round this - it refers to regulations. Like any vibrant, healthy organisation, policies and procedures are kept under review. This is one reason different editions of QFP abound. It is currently under preliminary review, subject to agreement at the next Yearly Meeting. The process is expected to take several years of careful discernment. We are urged to be active in this process, contributing as best we can, for example, attending those BYMs when it is considered. And if we have views, to voice them. Emerging issues we might like to think about include:

- The uses of new technology
- The link between prayer and action
- Family, safeguarding, etc.
- Outreach and what we are telling people about ourselves
- Ways of doing administration of small meetings
- Experimental worship, for example all age worship and 'afterwords'

One pressing issue has already been addressed, revised guidance on making public statements. We finalized a new version which will go to BYM next year for adoption. It's in the papers and is attached to this report for us to use now.

A theme running through the weekend was consideration of the health of our AMs, and some of the challenges they all seem to face, for example, the pastoral care of dispersed Friends/Attendees and the burden of looking after old buildings, which for some meetings seems to drain all their resources and energy. We were asked some uncomfortable questions. Just how diverse a community are we? Can the stillness of the meeting for worship be found elsewhere other than in our buildings? Have the demographics of the UK moved on and left the pattern of Meetings behind? Do the boundaries between AMs act as barriers to a greater sense of community, or are they portals to greater togetherness?

There is a lot to be cheerful about. There is an energy amongst Friends across the UK. Meetings are innovating. Whilst we are, geographically, one of the smallest Areas we are seen by others as lively and active. AMs are reaching out to work with their neighbours across traditional boundaries - the Quaker Tapestry coming to Chelmsford seems an ideal opportunity to develop this.

I will bring this report to a close with these words voiced in the meeting. "*To be truly radical we have to work at making hope possible, not despair convincing*". They brought to mind the work we've been entrusted to do in support of refugees. Maybe it's Colchester's long tradition of offering sanctuary to the persecuted or that the original Harwich meeting was established to cater for travellers to the continent but the fact remains we are an outward facing Meeting. Let us hope we can long continue to be so.

Robert Parkes

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