

## Meeting for Sufferings (MfS), Friends Meeting House, Manchester 6th October 2017

1 As meeting houses go Central Manchester meeting is big, seating up to 400 people, although on this occasion I counted about 100, those attending MfS and a good number of Friends who had come for the day, keen to see the main representative body of Quakers in Britain in action. I felt privileged to be in such an historic building that occupies a central place amongst Manchester's civic buildings. It became famous when it was used by Friends tending to the victims of the Peterloo Massacre, which took place on fields nearby. Recently it became both a gathering place for those protesting outside the Conservative Party Conference held just around the corner and a pop-up cafe for the police who were guarding the event.

2 The agenda led on naturally from BYM - what does God require of us? For some Friends, Quaker action means doing something physical and not without personal risk. The Court and Prison Register tends to be a standing item: this time we heard of about a dozen Friends who are up before the courts on a variety of charges, mostly to do with peaceful protesting against the arms trade. For other Friends, action may mean listening to the stories of victims of forced migration. And for others still, their calling may be simply upholding those Friends who are able to be more active. As we heard, all is deeply grounded in worship, reflection and deep discernment: worship and action spring from the same spiritual source.

3 One of the recurring themes at MfS is how best to fund Quaker work. This time there was also consideration of how best to do work. A lot of Quaker work is done centrally; other work lends itself to being more distributed. But maybe there are other ways too? Working more with other faith groups, or across AMs, for example. A phrase I wrote down was "liberating Friends for service". I understand this to mean enabling, in a variety of ways, Friends to do what God requires of them. For example, making sure those Quaker activists who get arrested are well supported by the Society, spiritually and materially.

4 Our discernment also turned to the issue of diversity and inclusion. At BYM we had begun to consider diversity in our committee and organisational structures, and particularly to look at how Quakers can remove barriers and actively seek wider participation in the full life of our meetings. It is recognised this might be a long journey. Different meetings are at different places along this journey. I'm not sure there is as yet a common understanding of what diversity and inclusion means. We need to be open to the Light to guide us. As a way to begin to think about diversity in our meetings we were invited to take back 3 questions:

- a) In what ways is your meeting (or committee or group) already diverse?
- b) In what ways could it be more diverse?
- c) What would help it become more diverse? What are the opportunities and barriers?

As a meeting we may wish to address these questions. How we do it is up to us. We were invited to respond and give feedback only when we, as a meeting, feel able.

5 As usual, a full report of the meeting and papers can be found on the dedicated MfS pages of the Quaker.org website

Robert Parkes, November 2017