

Shape Shifting - New Models of Quaker Meeting and Community - Quaker Life Representative Council 2017 - Woodbrooke October 2017

We started our weekend with the Clerk reminding us of the Manchester Conference in 1895 attended by some 1000 friends **"The Manchester Conference challenged the old thinking and distressed some."** He pointed out that at this meeting it was the younger Friends who sustained Friends. John Wilhelm Rowntree, who was 27 years old at the time, said: **"Friends are not bound by a heritage of creeds, and need not break with their great past to put themselves in touch with the present"** How we do we practise our heritage and how we face present times were the questions for us to consider over the weekend

Paul Parker and Deborah Rowland drew on their recent visit to two US Yearly Meetings to consider these questions for Quakers. What gives life? Why do we meet? What is Gospel order? They pointed out that for Fox, the organisation of Friends into Monthly Meetings was to obtain the release of energy for the service of the church, a step up into the life and order of the gospel, a true Gospel Order. **"Take care of not getting into form without the power, for that will bring deadness, and coldness, and weariness and faintings"**. They invited us to consider Gospel order as a stool with three legs - the inner light, the functioning of church committee and social testimony

- **The inward life of worship and discernment is the bedrock of being a Quaker.** While Spiritual practice and inward reflection are personal and individual, spiritual formation or spiritual learning is what happens at meeting. In the US considerable emphasis is placed on spiritual formation with active use of structures and practices - learning, clearness meetings, care committees, experimental forms of worship - on hand for friends to learn, as well as support and hold each other.
- **Functioning of the church committee .** Looking at meeting from all different viewpoints can help us find out what it is we need as a people of God together. In the US this has resulted in adopting different clerking patterns as well as more group discernment
 - in when agreeing on a minute collectively is the minute for taking a decision or sharing an idea?
 - how often are we in touch with those who cannot come?
 - are our meetings dominated by property matters?
 - Nominations should be about naming gifts and enabling friends to grow in service - what are the opportunities for every member of the community to get involved?.
- **Social testimony is what we do outside our meeting for worship.** Examples from the US include
 - setting up a community of young adults in a shared house as a means of supporting social concern and spiritual formation.(a Quake Voluntary Service)
 - training young people to do lobby the Quaker way so that they can lobby effectively in their state on Quaker concerns

Putting faith into action is what draws us together as a community . What is the point of the meeting for the community if all we do is keeping the organisation ticking over. Rather it's about working out how to begin and taking the first small steps and requires more than the fag ends of our time.

They concluded by asking us to consider whether there is a particular leg our meeting needs to pay attention to.

Julia Ryland spoke about her work supporting Friends all over the world. Using the same analogy of a 3 legged stool, her 3 legs were the individual, the group and tradition. In her experience tradition, incorporating culture, religion and politics, could be both life giving as well as bring about stagnation. Visiting Baltic Friends she was struck by how tradition has had a very strong influence on how the growth/development of Friends in very different contexts - in Catholic Lithuania, the poster advertising her talk also featured Adam, Eve and the serpent, and in meetings in Russia the comings and goings were very reminiscent of an Orthodox church service. Initially concerned, she realised that the meetings were alive, even if it was different to what she was accustomed to. Because of the distances involved meetings for business and meetings for worship were sometimes online meetings. Many people are finding Quakerism online and wanting to establish it locally, some in one Quaker flavour and others in different ones

She observed that a 'mother church' can be a burden in terms of creating expectations. In Budapest, where there are only four Friends, they were worried that they didn't have enough people to fill all the necessary committees. For her trying to help these tiny groups become Quakers means encouraging them to focus on what is needed, not what is expected. What is needed include the functions of making decisions together and caring for each other. These things are important, even if there are just two of you. Using our gifts is more important than structure. How are simplicity, community, equality, truth and peace evident in your workings? If we are doing these things, then how we are doing it is not important. So for her a more relevant question was not "how many people attend your meeting", but "how is truth or how is love prospering as your meeting".

Reflecting on the speakers' s presentations the group I was in looked at the purpose of area meeting and came up with these three roles - a **spiritual** role(- spiritual nurturing of local meetings) , a **social** role (building a community of local meetings, especially for smaller meetings) and an **educational** role (meeting for worship for learning). We felt that it was very important to have a spirit led approach to a busy agenda and to have meaningful discussion that resulted the taking of decisions.

In the afternoon we were given a choice of 4 different conversation groups to attend. I chose to go to "**What can we do with what we've got**" and "**Simpler meetings**". In the first conversation we were encouraged to make a consideration of what love requires of our meetings/what nourishes our meeting, as our starting point. From this flowed deepening spiritual friendships by doing more things together, listening hard to where the spirit is leading us and trusting it, making a clear separation between meeting for worship and afterthought for sharing, caring for the people who come to meeting, naming the gifts we see in each other and recognising the meeting's resources

In the second conversation about simpler meetings we were invited to think of what we would like to do more of if we had less cumber, to think about what is best for the person, what will the job do for them, rather than this person is good for this job and to think about what we can stop doing, choosing to let things go and spend time on things we want.

All in all there was lots of food for thought. As usual I returned home feeling spiritually recharged and very much wanting to share the stimulating thoughts and ideas I had received. I am hoping my report will have the same effect on those reading it and will be very happy to talk about it to interested local meetings.