

A reflection on the Woodbrooke conference 'Forced Migration: how can Quakers respond', by Robert Parkes

In February I was at Woodbrooke at the above event hosted by the Quaker Asylum and Refugee Network(QARN), the Quaker Council on European Affairs, Quaker United Nations Office, and Quaker Peace and Social Witness.

The conference saw the premier of a new powerful play by the Journeymen Theatre called "The Bundle". Commissioned by QARN it is based closely on the story of a real woman, Adilah, and her three young children, and her journey from domestic persecution and denial of human rights, including abduction into a forced marriage and subjection to a life of servitude. Adilah takes the ultimate risk in plotting her escape to the UK. Here she finds a home but it is not a happy-ever-after: she also encounters the Home Office's 'hostile environment' for asylum seekers and refugees, promulgated by the then Home Secretary, Theresa May.

The play does not shrink from portraying characters, ordinary English people, who are unsympathetic to the plight of refugees. In one scene a man is visiting the doctor. He complains of overwhelming symptoms. *"It's the bile, doctor, the bile, the bitter bile rising up in me. It's consuming me up"*. The doctor asks what could be causing this. *"It's them doctor. All of them "forinners" (for he has a Black Country accent). "They're filling up the waiting room. There's no space left. They're tekkin' over the place"*. This is a funny but also disturbing scene, tragic as well as comic. In discussion with the audience afterwards, the players explained the man is hurting - it's a cry for help.

This prompted some discussion about how immigration affects the existing population. Many people see forced migration as one of the great humanitarian crises of our time. It has been taken up by this Meeting as a Quaker concern and Friends locally are working with others to extend the hand of welcome. But not everyone sees it like this. This led to a session on how we should respond to those who, like the man visiting the doctor, are not sympathetic. Some of us talked about how we might initiate difficult conversations with those who are hurting, feel left-behind, and overwhelmed; and whether we were equipped to do so. The players, for example, saw the need to perform the play in front of difficult, challenging audiences, but acknowledged it was no easy feat to take it beyond the "Quaker bubble".

There were, I regret, no ready-made solutions I can report on. On a positive note, I can report that the event was an important milestone in the development of a spirit-led position of Quakers in Britain, that will be considered by our Yearly Meeting in August. Meanwhile, what could we do locally? Would we wish to invite the Journeyman Theatre to perform this play? How could we take it to a wider audience?

We were reminded of Quakers of Advices & Queries 33 and 32 and perhaps that is the point to conclude this report:

*Are you alert to practices here and throughout the world which discriminate against people on the basis of who or what they are or because of their beliefs? Bear witness to the humanity of all people, including those who break society's conventions or its laws. Try to discern new growing points in social and economic life. Seek to understand the causes of injustice, social unrest and fear. Are you working to bring about a just and compassionate society which allows everyone to develop their capacities and fosters the desire to serve?*

*Bring into God's light those emotions, attitudes and prejudices in yourself which lie at the root of destructive conflict, acknowledging your need for forgiveness and grace. In what ways are you involved in the work of reconciliation between individuals, groups and nations?*