

Meeting for Sufferings(MfS) at Friends House London on 4th July 2015 Report to AM on Sunday 12th July

This is my first report as the AM's newly appointed representative to MfS. For those of you unfamiliar with MfS, it is the standing representative body entrusted with the care of the business of the Britain Yearly Meeting (BYM) through the year. Its origins go back to the early days of Quakers when it was set up to address the "sufferings" of many Friends around the country. It did this by effectively lobbying king and parliament and it's been at the forefront of campaign and lobbying ever since: as part of the anti-slavery movement, in setting-up the Friends Ambulance Unit, the Kindertransport, and, most recently in challenging the creeping militarisation of schools in England by the Department for Education. See <http://www.quaker.org.uk/news/quakers-britain-oppose-expansion-cadets-state-schools>

MfS has a visionary and prophetic role for the whole Society in Britain. It's been described as the beating heart of the Society. It decides the priorities and sets the direction of BYM in the Long Term Framework. It plays a vital role in fostering communication throughout the Yearly Meeting and in reviewing and testing concerns referred to it by AMs. It gives guidance on policy issues referred to it by BYM Trustees. It is also a worshipping community and its business is conducted in the manner of Friends. Yet whilst its origins go back a long way, it is modern and forward thinking in its outlook, embracing social media, for example, and on this occasion, sharing draft minutes at the start of the meeting to help with clarity and assist the process. There's more about its origins, role and purpose in QFP Chapter 7 and at <http://www.quaker.org.uk/sufferings>

The morning session was largely an induction for new representatives like myself. Over lunch we met in regional groups so we could get to know the MfS representatives in neighbouring Areas. It was also a chance to meet BYM Trustees, Friends serving on central committees and Friends House staff who all help it to run smoothly.

In the afternoon we got down to business. MfS has been asked to take action on the big issues identified at Yearly Meeting in May - social inequality and injustice, housing as a tested concern. These issues are complicated and do not have simple solutions. In many parts of the world they are often exacerbated by climate change. They are also interconnected, and as the Pope said earlier this week *"These are not isolated issues. I wonder whether we can see that these destructive realities are part of a system which has become global"*.

Quakers do not have a magic wand. We have to be realistic about what we can achieve. But we can make a difference. Quakers have had a much bigger impact than their relative small numbers would suggest. And Quakers have probably been at their most effective when they've spoken from a strong evidence base - the work of Seebom Roundtree springs to mind - and as one Friend at this meeting put it *"...we need to find out what's going on and inform ourselves before we are able to do anything about it"*

We spent time reflecting on one urgent concern in particular, the concern for refugees. We heard it is estimated there are over 50 million migrants in the world today. People are on the move. There are many different reasons for this. Many are fleeing war and persecution, others are simply trying to escape inequality and grinding poverty and look for a better life. It is after all something humans have always done - in fact, there a very few English families who don't have a migration story somewhere in their past. Some of you may have seen the open letter to the Prime Minister, expressing our deepest concern for the plight of migrants desperately trying to cross the Mediterranean. See <http://www.quaker.org.uk/news/quakers-speak-plight-migrants>. A letter to the Prime Minister, of course, doesn't sort it. There's a lot more to do. QPSW is exploring with Quaker Asylum and Refugee Network (QARN) how they can work together more closely. We heard that Quaker Council for European Affairs (QCEA) is looking at these issues and working with other faith groups in Europe who are actively campaigning on these matters. At this stage it was felt the most important action we can take as individuals is to challenge the rhetoric around migration – a rhetoric which gives licence to politicians to introduce policies based on exclusion rather than being human centred.

I came away from my first MfS with strong sense of corporate identity and recalled how in the early 19th century Quakers were a by-word for organisational effectiveness *"Let us look at, and emulate the patient resolution of the Quakers. They have conquered without arms – without violence- without threats. They conquered by union"*

The next MfS is in September. I'm looking forward to it and reporting again to AM. A full set minutes of are on the Quaker website at <http://www.quaker.org.uk/mfs-4-july-2015-final-minutes-follow-letter-and-other-related-papers>. There is also a good report in this week's Friend (10 July). Finally, in relation to our concern for housing, the Quaker Housing Trust is organizing an exploratory conference at Woodbrooke later in the year. Look out for details.

Robert Parkes
11/7/2015