

Meeting for Sufferings (MfS), Friends House (FH), London, 3rd December 2016

At the opening we were joined by a group of Young Friends attending their Young Quakers Participation Day. Their presence, I felt, added to the vibrancy and diversity of our meeting.

MfS was established originally to consider the sufferings of Quakers. Over time, the practice of recording Friends' names in the 'Great book of Sufferings' lapsed but in 1997 MfS agreed to maintain a register of Friends before the courts or imprisoned for matters of conscience. Earlier in the year we heard of five Friends who had participated in the *No Faith in Trident* day of action at Burghfield and were up before the Courts. This time we heard their trial was set for later in the month at Reading Magistrates, charged with aggravated trespass. They were held in the Light. [Update. They were acquitted. No case to answer. However, others from another group come to trial in a couple of weeks time]

BYM Trustees reported a mixture of good and not so good news. Membership continues to age and decline; major disruption around FH caused by HS2 is a real risk; BYM maintains its current level of activity but is drawing on its reserves, legacies and FH Hospitality; there has been a minimal response to date to the Treasurer's call for higher contributions.

But the good news! BYM is outward facing. We took epistles from no less than 8 YMs across Europe. BYM has developed an operational plan, aligned to our *Faith in the Future*. We shall hear more about this at BYM. I got a sense of professionalism, strategy, and, yes, leadership, that some of us heard about at our away weekend at High Leigh.

Quaker Council for European Affairs has gone through a process of renewal, with refreshed governance and discerned priorities: peace in Europe & human rights - in the way Quakers do best through quite diplomacy. We reasserted our commitment to Europe as a community if not an institution. Funding from other traditional sources such as the JRTT is likely to tail off so funding from BYM, which is the largest YM in Europe, has become more pressing.

We then considered a couple of key concerns that have come before our meeting. First, the decriminalisation of drugs. The full minute can be read within the MfS papers. To paraphrase, this is a very complex issue. Friends are not in unity with the concern. We did agree we need to seek a humane and compassionate response to drug users. There was an appetite from Friends to learn more about the issue and support for Cornwall AM in taking this forward with other AMs that have expressed an interest, working with Quaker Action on Alcohol and Drugs and other organisations where appropriate.

Secondly, towards a vision of a criminal justice system. Again, the full minute is in the MfS papers. To summarise: we saw the document as a tool to help Friends think about our view of what the system should be and as a resource when raising specific concerns in a local context. We also saw the importance of working with others, in keeping with FiF, in the probation sector, legal aid and other services. The AM minutes will be passed to the Crime, Community and Justice Sub-committee of QPSW to aid its further deliberation.

Towards the close we were rejoined by the Young Friends They'd been thinking about how to better engage with Quakerism. They told us, candidly, what they saw as barriers: time, travel distance, the high cost of many events, fear of standing out, not being considered good enough, and the overall lack of awareness of many events. Food for thought.

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, January 2017