

## **Meeting for Sufferings (MfS), Friends House (FH), London, 1st April 2017**

In many ways this MfS felt like a prelude to BYM, a combination of hope and optimism as we look forward to living out our Faith in the Future but also very mindful of the challenges that face Quakers in Britain today.

Many of these challenges revolve around the maintenance of our structures, both in terms of our buildings and of our organisation. The Heritage project revealed that some 46% of our meeting houses are listed buildings. The attendant stewardship of this estate bears down on us. This might be one of the reasons why Area Meetings (AMs) are increasingly reporting that it is difficult to find Friends to serve as trustees, to a lesser extent, treasurers, and to sustain the work of governance generally. Added to which, some AMs have inherited complex governance arrangements which add to the burden on trustees and to the number needed, e.g., where there are separate trusts and charities linked to the AM.

In response, Meetings have been innovating in various ways, e.g., buying in professional support or asking a neighbouring AM if they can help fill a trustee post. Yet they are still struggling. One representative spoke of the real risk of their AM fragmenting and I'm hearing more and more the phrase "drifting into congregationalism". Elsewhere, we hear of meetings where there is insufficient understanding and support for Quaker governance in general and the legal accountabilities of trustees in particular: an AM cannot function as a charitable body if it does not have enough trustees.

All this is compounded by the demographics of the Society. It remains predominately white and middle-class. It is also ageing, which means a shortage of Friends with the good health and time available to carry out these roles. Or, to put it another way, too many jobs: too few people. Meanwhile, Quakers abroad look to us in Britain for inspiration, in terms of spirituality, on sustainability, and upholding Quakerism across Europe, for example.

Faced with these challenges, Quaker Stewardship Committee is keen to promote and encourage a conversation about future governance, which it believes is both necessary and urgent to secure a sustainable governance model for future generations. There is, as yet, no national picture to guide discernment. Part of the answer might be for some AMs to merge. However, it is felt that addressing these problems one at a time and without a long-term vision for our governance risks missing opportunities and making a decision in one area that closes off options in another. And, in our haste to adapt we should guard against losing sight of gospel order. In other words, let's not throw the baby out with the bath water.

What can we do in the meantime? On a personal level, I'm look forward to BYM. It's a way I reconnect with Quakers around the country and abroad. One practical measure being suggested is to make better use of trustees' annual reports, for in reach and outreach (our trustees are already thinking about this, by the way). If a report includes what an AM is doing to fulfil the Canterbury commitment, this can be read-off by BYM centrally, to avoid the need to contact AMs separately. Another idea is a standard format for these reports, so that key information from AMs is gathered in a consistent and regular way without the need for extra separate surveys or correspondence.

Looking beyond these shores, we were urged to help enrich understanding between Friends worldwide and engage more in Quaker issues around the globe. The Quaker World Relations Network has produced a new factsheet, attached. This gives a number of suggestions on how individual Friends and meetings can help.

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, May 2017