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The future of Friends in Europe: Themes for a conversation

Quaker Theological Discussion Group, Barnesville, Ohio, USA, June 2009

Two visions...

- I think Quakers could be for the majority of the population to be honest. We are practicing speaking to each other and to our non-Quaker friends. We're pretty good at having non-Quaker friends so the outreach possibilities are great as we gain confidence in our faith.

In twenty years? A Meeting in every street? Could be the foundation for democracy and human response to the threat of runaway climate change.

- We do not teach or train our children in the Quaker faith. We do not have a clear message for newcomers. So we are an elderly socio-cultural group that is dying out.

The numbers are falling and the changed social and economic circumstances make it difficult to find people or money to do the essential work. As a whole generation dies off (the 75-90 year olds) there will be a drastic drop in numbers.

These are the voices of two different British Friends, anticipating very different futures for Friends in Europe. Which of these visions of the future is more likely? And to what extent are the insights of *both* voices valid, and mutually instructive?

My purpose is not to provide answers but to provoke a conversation—and even to enlist your help in conducting this conversation. Part of the problem in answering the question may be a lack of shared definitions and assumptions among those who are participating in building the future of the European Quaker community. This paper's audience might be able to play a role in building a common language to aid this conversation.

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The questions...

Twenty Friends from nine countries¹ agreed to help me with this paper by responding to a set of questions. I drew their names from a variety of sources, including Friends active in the European and Middle East Section of Friends World Committee for Consultation; a few were nominated by others interested in this project. As a group, they represent a thoughtful and very well qualified sample of the Friends movement in Europe. However, a sample of 20 is far too small to draw firm conclusions. Instead, I simply want to make a few modest observations to keep the conversation going.

I deliberately gave my questions a flat, deadpan voice, trying my best to load them with as little emotional, cultural, or theological baggage as possible. I had, after all, set myself the limited task of opening a conversation on the future of Friends in Europe, rather than asking how likely it was that this future would match my own theoretical ideal. Furthermore, I did not want a polarized conversation based on unintended hints that I had a correct answer in mind. However, the one question that had overt theological content—*According to your own belief or intuition, what does God want to do in Europe (or in your country) specifically through Friends?*—did reveal something of the challenges awaiting future conversation partners. More about that when we get to question 3, below.

Here is what my twenty collaborators, as a group, seem to be telling us through their answers to my questions:

1. As you consider the future of Friends in Europe, what factors or trends give you the most hope?

In decreasing order of importance, here are factors or trends mentioned by at least four people:

¹ "From nine countries"—that is, attending or identifying with Friends meetings in nine countries, in some cases as expatriates.

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Increased access to Friends messages, for example via Internet channels, outreach programs, and new translations of Friends material. (6)

Increased numbers of regional and international linkages among Friends, such as cross-border meetings. (6)

In view of social and environmental challenges, the need for the Friends witness is as great as, or greater than, it has ever been. (6)

Friends have a unique message. (5)

A new generation of Friends is coming forward—young people and newcomers to the faith. (4)

Friends are putting resources—human and material—into outreach and community-building. (4)

Recent numerical growth. (4)

Here are some of these trends in the original voices:²

Need for Friends: (Also see *A unique message*, below.)

- I feel there is a great plenty of room for Friends in Europe, especially Central and Eastern parts of it. Here post-soviet consumerism of last twenty years and continuing moral relativism/hierarchical power games/public corruption is making most people longing for some clear, meaningful sense and direction in life, some clear moral resistance against manipulative, cruel discounts/denigrations of individual people or whole groups of them. Very few organizations or individuals are clearly answering this challenge, but RSOF has a very clear, consistent and direct answers that could help a lot of people around here (Eastern Europe).
- ... The questing spiritual openness of Friends resonates with the yearnings and doubts of so many individuals in contemporary society.
- ... There seems to be some growth in the number of individual members. But the formation of new groups, little Quaker communities, is not equally easy.

Access:

- The Quaker Quest movement in Britain, and possibly wider afield, gives me hope.
- The availability of our on-line course in different languages means that Quakerism does not any long require a knowledge of English.
- The developments under the broad heading of 'Quaker Quest' which started in Britain YM (specifically: London) in 2001/2 and which have now been continuing for a number of years have shown that a vigorous outreach programme is very successful, can be replicated by Meetings in very different circumstances and in different countries and has an in-reach element.

Quaker Quest (www.quakerquest.org) was mentioned more than any other specific outreach initiative. It would be an interesting discussion in itself—and beyond the scope of this paper—to consider Quaker Quest's presentation of the Quaker message, its adequacy and accuracy; but my intuition is that many of my respondents would find its tone and content congenial.

Linkages:

- I have a feeling of community with Friends worldwide.
- On mainland Europe one great factor is the friendships between and meeting together of Friends from neighbouring countries. There are annual Border Meetings, e.g., one between Friends from the east of France, west of Germany, Luxembourg, Belgium and Holland, and another between Friends from the south

² I have taken the liberty of editing typographical errors and unclear usages. I have not identified individual voices either by name or by location, although, in a few cases, giving location was unavoidable. It was my judgment (and I intend this as a compliment to my collaborators) that almost every observation they made was applicable beyond their local situation, and given the small size of the Quaker family, I wanted avoid the distraction of speculation about local personalities. The full list of respondents is at the end of this paper.

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of Germany and Switzerland. Friends think in an international way.

A unique message:

- Even in Liberal Quakerism there seems to be a return to our roots which hopefully will mean a return to Christ and original Quaker Faith as explained in Holy Scripture and the writings of George Fox, William Penn, Robert Barclay, etc.
- Lots of creative service stuff going on, and we seem to be finding the words to express that in God language now as well, which makes me understand how we are a church together.
- ...There seems to be a spiritual hunger more widely in Europe that many Friends believe can be met by what Quakerism has to offer.

2. What factors or trends seem most discouraging to you?

These factors or trends were mentioned by at least four Friends:

Scale—lack of sufficient numbers to solve problems or ensure self-perpetuation. (7)

Disinclination or unwillingness to affiliate (sometimes mentioned as a cultural phenomenon). (6)

Unclarity of the Quaker message. (5)

Quakerly diffidence—a concern not to be perceived as “pushy.” (5)

A wider culture unfriendly to overt faith. (4)

Decline in numbers of Friends. (4)

Conflict among Friends (4), sometimes associated with the first factor (scale).

Other factors included distances, language barriers, intellectual rather than spiritual conviction, and class barriers. Here are some representative comments:

Issues of scale:

- ... Some emerging groups seem to be dominated by strong personalities, which sometimes makes it difficult for new people who are interested to become part of the group.
- The still small number of Friends in many countries which make meetings hard to sustain and which make interpersonal conflicts much more devastating than they would be in a congregation of 1000 people.
- The fact that numbers of Friends are dwindling in some Yearly Meetings in Europe—in some case below the level where they can be a critical mass large enough to attract others—is also a cause for discouragement.

Unwillingness to affiliate or commit:

- Many of our meetings have a considerable group of ‘friends of Friends’—attenders or people generally interested but rather passive in attendance. Why do these people not seek membership? Why is it so hard to commit and become part of the crew instead of remaining a passenger on the ship? While I believe we all want to make Quaker meeting available as a one-off stop or a temporary resting place for people, we need whole-hearted commitment, and this is often an issue among meetings across Europe.
- The very enthusiastic enquirers who arrive, get all excited, and then disappear for years. But folk are just like that, I suppose.
- I must explain that Czech are a very pragmatic nation. We have the highest percentage of mechanic engineers in the world and on the other hand one of the higher rate of people without confession. It does not mean, Czechs are Atheists, rather that they do not like organizing themselves. We are a nation of people, who do not want anybody to tell them, what to believe and how to do things, because a right Czech know everything better, or at least wants to find his own solution. For such people, Quakerism is quite attractive,

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but it is very difficult to make a group out of them.

Unclearly of the Quaker message:

- That many Quakers in the Liberal side (especially) in the name of 'tolerance' and 'love' accept any idea to come into the Quaker Faith.... How can a Quaker be also an Anglican or a Buddhist (other religion) is beyond my understanding.
- I get a bit bored with what seems to me like arrogance from people very strongly identified with labelling themselves atheist but inside Friends. I think they possibly have just the same faith as I do but they think I mean something else which they look down on! ... I struggle when people are anti-Jesus for whatever reason in my own Meeting, I yearn for that sense of union when I feel we are all gathered together and hearing people saying Jesus doesn't mean anything to them it breaks that fellowship for me.

Quakerly diffidence:

- 'Silence' of Friends (you do not hear/see much, sometimes anything of them unless you search for them with some vigour).
- Most European countries outside Britain have just a handful of Friends and I don't think there is a lot of idea of how to deal with outreach or (dare I say the word) mission. I wish liberal Friends could come to terms with an understanding that what we have discovered is important, liberating, life changing and vital and that we could tell others about this without feeling that we are imposing something on others or somehow oppressing them.

Unwelcoming cultural context:

- Moral superficiality, shallowness and outward emotional/moral toxicity of public life (the greatest challenge for all).

3. According to your own belief or intuition, what does God want to do in Europe (or in your country) specifically through Friends?

Although stashed in an innocuous third position on the list, this question was the heart of my inquiry. Respondents were by no means united in a vision of God's mission for Friends, but they rewarded the question with a rich list of ways Friends could bless Europe. The following items were mentioned by four or more Friends—note that the categories overlap considerably:

Promoting tolerance, mutual acceptance. (9)

Serving as reconcilers. (8)

Demonstrating a model of healthy (fair, spiritually vital) community. (8) (Three used the term "Kingdom of God.")

Providing refuge for those avoiding or recovering from oppressive religiosity. (8)

Revealing God's nature or will. (5)

Providing a place for spiritual seekers. (4)

Advocating a vision of simplicity or right stewardship. (4)

Advocating a vision of social liberation. (4)

Maintaining or opening a space for an inward, reflective spirituality. (4)

Interestingly, five Friends among these nineteen reacted to the wording of the question. One said, "This isn't my way of expressing things"; another said, "I would have to say that this is question is formulated in such a way that I find it really difficult to respond to. I was brought up principally in the liberal tradition of Friends in Western Europe and so I would not put the question that way." Among the "not my language" respondents, three did go on to list visions of Friends' influence upon Europe.

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Noting that the classifications are not intended to be rigid, here are some of the voices responding to this question:

Covering multiple aspects in one sentence!:

- I believe and hope that God smiles heartily upon the liberal, unprogrammed tradition within Europe as a precious meeting place for people who are a) refugees from other religious traditions b) generally seeking a spiritual home but “suspicious” of anything that smacks of dogmatic, heavy-handed, sectarian religion c) explicitly seeking a faith group rooted in Christianity but open to more liberal expressions thereof (or, as I would express it, looking for the very heart of Christianity without the “wrapping paper” around it, to use an expression of Swedish Quaker and writer Emilia Fogelklou) d) longing for a universalist approach to faith that is not a New Age fad.
- ... It may still be that God wants it to be possible for Europeans to have a faith, rooted in Christianity, available and kept alive in the face of vigorous secularism side by side with dwindling fundamentalist Christianity and the growth of Islam.

Promoting tolerance:

- More nonviolence and tolerance could probably help to improve the situation. Friends can do small things where they live, in their countries—in order to make changes, step by step, towards more stable, merciful and peaceful world.
- There is always a possibility to be directly, simply human with one another, I believe.
- ... Providing a regular place for reflection and meditation together with tolerance and compassion may be increasingly needed in society as it seems to be developing.
- Give an example of toleration and openness in daily life, and show that there are other ways in politics than a militaristic and aggressive way.

Serving as reconcilers:

- This question is a challenging one for me, and one that isn't phrased in language I would use. However, I believe that God wants people in Europe, or just in Britain, to get on with each other and to try and make the world a better place. I think at present there are particular issues connected with the relationship between Muslims and Christians/others in Europe and I think that Quakers are well placed to meet with/talk with both 'sides' of this and to bring a positive message.
- I have a very strong sense that the Quaker tradition that is predominant in Europe enables us to be 'honest brokers' and bridge people to reach those who have been brought up in secular societies and to those of other faiths. Although this is controversial, I am excited that there are people who are attracted to Quaker testimonies and even seek formal membership, yet do not lose their allegiance to other faith traditions.

Providing refuge:

- Seems perhaps we have a special ministry to folk in religious abuse recovery as we are all about cutting back to the living vine, no irrational/nonscriptural add-ons.
- I feel that Quakers provide a home for people who want to find God's way / follow their internal moral compass in their own lives and who do not want to sign up to a creedal religion.

Model communities/Kingdom of God:

- I am convinced here in Europe, east and west, we have a wonderful role to play where people could find in the Quakers a living God and a liberated and spiritual way of life.
- Our mission is to express and share with others in everyday life in simplicity and integrity our experiential approach and non-judgmental vision of divine Kingdom on Earth, not being entirely plunged and captured by merely worldly things.
- What are Friends called to do: to put it into George Fox' language: to be patterns and examples. We need to ensure that we live our lives—in so far this is humanly possibly—and I for one fall short of this all the time



—in such a way that we demonstrate what a functioning, effective, fair, just, conflict resilient and peaceful world might look like. I don't think that this is essentially different for different parts of the world. But clearly in Western Europe, we have a much harder task in both doing this and demonstrating it because it is so counter-cultural. That is one of the reasons why numbers (in terms of the overall number of Quakers and Attenders) matter—the more we are the more likely we are to be visible in our attempts to do this and the more likely we would be to have the mutual support to keep going even if it is difficult.

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My questionnaire also included four other questions. To summarize these additional issues briefly:

4. *In the USA, there is a lively conversation between so-called evangelical Friends and so-called liberal Friends. Do such conversations also exist in Europe? Do such conversations (or might such conversations) have any relevance or usefulness for the future of Friends in Europe?* Most responded that they were aware of such conversations (several mentioned evangelical Friends in Ireland and Hungary) but that such conversations were not frequent or a high priority. Two voices:

- As far as I know Friends in Europe—certainly Friends in the UK—are liberal, i.e., non-evangelical and often non-theistic. So such conversations can't happen as an evangelical Friend is a contradiction in terms here. The only usefulness of Europeans knowing of such conversations might be for making more conventionally Christian individuals feel a little more at home in a Quaker meeting.
- I think such conversations are necessary for a number of reasons:
 - * We can learn from each other
 - * It will help us to develop greater tolerance for those who don't necessarily see things our way
 - * From the point of view of someone engaged in public advocacy on behalf of Friends, it is important to understand the whole spectrum of Quakerism in Europe in order to respond effectively to decision-makers who have encountered Quakerism in different forms.

Another Friend mentioned the definition puzzle: definitions of Christianity and theism may be promoted by circles *outside* Friends that are very unhelpful for conversations *among* Friends.

Questions 5 and 6: *How many active Friends are there in your own worship group, meeting, or church? In your country? Should these numbers be larger, or are they at about the right level? In twenty years, what might these numbers be?*

The numbers reported from continental Europe (and from the conservative movement among U.K. Friends) are, not surprisingly, very small. One Friend reported, "In my own local Friends group there are about 5." Another: "Strasbourg meeting: about 7 active Friends plus about 5 occasional attenders. Luxembourg meeting: slightly less." Similar reports come from other major cities of Europe. The old, well-established Norway Yearly Meeting includes 130 members, and it is one of the largest continental yearly meetings.

Britain Yearly Meeting, with its census of 15,000-25,000 Friends (depending upon definition) and Ireland Yearly Meeting (about a thousand) are at a different scale, but even these represent a tiny fraction of their countries' populations—and also a huge proportional decline in comparison to their peak numbers centuries earlier.

Responses to the sixth question ("Should these numbers be larger...?") generally looked for growth, but not just any kind of growth. Here are five voices:

- [The numbers] ... could be larger if all potential and latent sympathisers were brought into the flock. These numbers may well decline unless "liberal" Friends find ways of drawing in more like-minded people.... I have the liberal's typical ambivalence about whether it is our responsibility to do this....
- While I do not think we are quantity-focused, I would certainly hope that numbers can grow, both in the size of groups but also number of groups established. Tiny groups are so vulnerable—it is easy to "burn

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out” when responsible for a tiny group, and any group will be better nourished if there are more people in it. I would hope for doubling of Sweden’s membership (it has been at about 100 forever-and-ever) in general, in the number of meetings, and in the membership of those local groups. And I would hope the same for meetings across Europe. In God’s time, with the appropriate structures in place for right ordering, teaching, nurture, outreach....the harvest is indeed ready, but the workers are few....

- I don’t know that I would think of these as relevant questions. Within the European liberal Quaker tradition we don’t do mission work and so outreach is low key and not primarily intended to swell numbers for the numbers’ sake, but to make available information about Quakers, Quaker beliefs and views and to provide an open and warm welcome to those who are interested. On that basis, we don’t have a view about ‘the right level of numbers’.

Personally, I think that Quakerism has all the ingredients to be one of the most popular communities of faith—it is open, tolerant, based on lived faith in action, committed to peace, equality, simplicity and integrity. All these are values which we need to build on to bring about a better world (or as some would phrase it: the Kingdom of God here and now).

- Larger of course. In twenty years if we obey Christ we ought to grow very much.
- I think numbers could be much larger in such a big country as Russia. I can even imagine Russian Yearly Meeting with several Area Meetings in different cities. BUT the future is quite unpredictable, and especially in Russia.

7. *How would someone in your neighborhood or city who is not a Quaker, but who seeks spiritual answers and a congenial spiritual community, find out about Quakers? How would he or she locate your Friends group?*

Despite the evidence of Quaker “diffidence,” respondents listed a variety of access points, but one predominated: the Internet, particularly Web sites. Other methods and channels varied widely, mostly according to local factors: signs on meetinghouses and Quaker institutions, distribution of brochures to homes, participation in festivals and fairs, school students’ research projects on Quakers, listings in newspapers and telephone directories, personal invitation, reputation in the workplace, rentals of Quaker facilities to non-Quaker groups, and so on. One respondent suggested a completely new ministry: a consumers’ evaluation service of translators and translation bureaux, sponsored by Friends as an expression of our concern for clear communication.

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Conclusion: observations and themes

My first question to European Friends who read this paper is the following: on balance, did I provide an accurate overview of beliefs about your future? What factors might need more emphasis? Which observations simply don’t apply in one or another location? What significant local factors remain unrepresented?

Only one correspondent mentioned social class. However, I believe—based on several decades of observation—that class is a significant factor in Friends’ lack of growth, not just in Europe but worldwide. However, it’s also my experience that confronting class realities calmly, prayerfully, and without defensiveness, is easier advocated than accomplished. **How might this theme be examined fruitfully?**

Many European Friends are concerned not to offend those who are allergic to conventional religious language. **Does this introduce an unintended bias against those who might not have this allergy, yet would still welcome the simplicity, reflectiveness, and integrity of Friends faith and practice?**

A related question: The provision of a “refuge” from oppressive religion is clearly a valued ministry of Friends. **Are we sometimes in danger of apologizing for (or simply avoiding) any features of Friends faith and practice that might be similar to those other backgrounds for fear of negative reactions? Does this distort our own spirituality?** This is a conversation that might require great sensitivity, but I fear that we sometimes take the road of negative self-censorship rather than searching for a more positive ministry of healing for wounded refugees.

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John Punshon once divided Western religious people into two groups with two characteristic questions: the children of the Enlightenment (“How can I know what is true?”) and the children of the Reformation (“Where will I/we spend eternity?”). In my experience, people in one group often talk right past the people in the other group, and neither has much native sympathy for the other, even though they might actually share important spiritual and ethical concerns. In my questionnaire, I asked what God wanted to do in Europe specifically through Friends. Several responded that (for example) “this isn’t phrased in language I would use.” **To what extent are we talking past each other? Would an inter-Quaker “Enlightenment/Reformation” dialogue increase our capacity to speak to a wider range of non-Quakers?**

If we neglect this important dialogue, I worry that we may eventually become, in effect, two streams of Quaker history: a limited chaplaincy for an individualistic, intellectual, highly ethical stream of Quakerism that is weak on transcendent motivation but unlikely to disappear altogether because it is persistently attractive to a tiny sector of the public; and a more public form of Protestant-flavored Quakerism that is more transparent and accessible, with a wider emotional range, yet is poorer for lack of fellowship with the first stream. **Is such a bifurcated future to be welcomed, or to be avoided?**³

Finally, other Christian groups in Europe, descendants of the dominant state-church or Christendom model of earlier centuries, have declined in numbers and influence, even though many of them have a “universalist” wing. At the same time, other forms of Christianity, such as Eastern Orthodoxy and Pentecostals, have taken up some of the space vacated by the older bodies. Both Europe and the United States are becoming mission fields for creative and energetic evangelists from Asia, Africa, and Latin America. **Where do Quakers fit into this changing scene? Are we part of the older, declining picture? Or are we part of the answer to that decline? And do visiting or immigrant Quakers from East Africa or Latin America have a role to play in the shaping of Europe’s Quaker future?**⁴

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3 This development might be analogous to the American experience described in Albert Fowler’s *Pendle Hill Pamphlet Two Trends in Modern Quaker Thought*. (PHP 112. Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill, 1961.) Fowler was primarily addressing a trend within unprogrammed Quakerism, not between that form and the pastoral form.

4 Missiologist Andrew Wall, among others, addresses this “reverse migration” from former mission fields to the “old world” communities that first evangelized them. See, for example, “Theology as Scholarship in a Global Church,” *Bulletin of the Boston Theological Institute* 5.2, Spring 2006, pages 6-7, accessed on 8 June 2009 at http://bostontheological.org/publications/bulletin_of_the_bti.htm. Also see Philip Jenkins, *God’s Continent: Christianity, Islam, and Europe’s Religious Crisis*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.