

"The future of the Religious Society of Friends in Britain"

What can we say today that will guide Quakerism over the coming decades?

An essay from a Disconnected Friend

There's nothing new in the question posed in the title of this essay. It's an essential part of Quakerism that has kept the Society on its toes for hundreds of years. Our book *Christian Faith and Practice* records numerous expressions of concern that our numbers are dwindling and that our influence for changes in society, based on Christ's teaching, will fade. Being on one's toes, however, becomes less easy with age when personal energy levels are lower. The need therefore is constantly to bequeath the Society to those whose energy and time is still on offer. The difficulty is how to allow new members to find us and let them discover that Quakerism is indeed a worthwhile cause. After that we can encourage them to participate fully in The Society. Eventually, and without undue delay, we need sufficient confidence to allow them to take over. The need is to maintain a Society that will attract people in many walks of life who are seeking ways of enlightened living.

Here then is an action plan for consideration by Friends. A similar plan could perhaps become part of a template for those seeking to devise more reliable systems of banking, commerce and politics – Friends have given leadership in those fields before.

Friends are not the only ones who are anxiously examining their beliefs and procedures; we have all lost much in the face of burgeoning, unchallenged lack of self-government and there are many from all walks of life who are looking for better patterns for living. So many of today's 'comforters' are ineffectual. For example many of us are afraid of silence. We fill every moment with music from our Ipods; we drink alcohol to blot out all the tension; or take other drugs – uppers and downers – in the search for balance. Some seekers study and attend various associations and movements in the quest of inner peace and contentment. We believe that Quakerism could offer collective sympathy, help and achievement. Yet the majority of seekers have either never come across Quakerism or have wrong information about it.

Commercial, government and cultural organisations have found that 'marketing' is necessary to inform the public and draw their attention to what they have to offer. In marketing we first need to be clear about what we stand for. We need a clear conception of our message and the confidence in it to be able to convey our belief and enthusiasm. In current terminology we need to agree a mission statement.

DEFINITIONS

People will want to know what we believe and represent. Seekers by their very nature are looking for certainty – beliefs and behaviours to which they can pin their allegiance. Friends by their very nature, tend to be 'seeing the light in everyone' and welcome many who soon feel well-informed enough, despite their diverse views, to speak as if 'on behalf of Friends'. Heard from the outside, these pronouncements may throw doubt as to our beliefs and aims. Some of the pamphlets that we handed to enquirers in the nineteen eighties did give the impression that it was not necessary to be a Christian to be a Friend – although 'most Quakers are Christian'. Perhaps the Society was going through a particularly 'freethinking' phase? Perhaps the Society still thinks this way?

How often have you been asked 'are Quakers Christians? I've read they needn't be?' Indeed locally I have been told with authority by an Episcopalian that 'Quakers aren't Christian!' If other Christian denominations innocently classify Friends with Humanists, Bahais, Greens and other groups it is not helpful in directing Christian seekers to Meeting

House. Friends, therefore, need to be clear in their own minds about their religion and in the light that they shine outwards. In my opinion we need to be definite about our Christianity – and to beam out a plain definition: ‘We are Christian!’ Others may declare: “No you aren’t – because you won’t say you believe exactly what we believe!”

FRIEND: “Like what?”

OTHERS: “Like eternal life!”

FRIEND: “Doesn’t that depend on what you understand by ‘eternal life’?”

OTHERS: “What about transubstantiation?”

FRIEND: “Some Friends may believe in it. Depends on their background. Some Christians say you can’t be a Christian unless you believe it! Friends think it depends on the individual – because each individual has a direct line to the love that surrounds us – usually coded as ‘God’. We believe we have as much right to claim to be Christian as anyone else!”

Having made the point that Quakerism is a Christian movement we then have to define *what* Quakers believe. That’s when it becomes more complicated because to the outsider, especially from established denominations, we are difficult to pin down. Many of us appear to have different beliefs. We do, though, try to come to agreement about conclusions that we reach in interpreting Christianity for today’s situations. I find it refreshing that The Society of Friends from time to time issues ‘A Quaker view on.....’ something or other. To me that is evidence of the ‘spirit’ of Christ living eternally. It may have taken years of discussion and silent contemplation before such a view is acceptable to the majority of Friends but the impact of such declarations, over the centuries, has been instrumental in changing society. The temptation here is to tease others, like the Roman Catholics about taking three hundred years before conceding that the world might be round – but some Friends may feel the same about their fellow members’ reluctance to accept that a large number of our population are attracted to people of the same sex and wish to make life partnerships of that nature; or that shareholders are not more important than workers, customers or the environment.

I suggest that the Society of Friends might even consider adding the word ‘Christian’ to their title and drop the word ‘Religious’. Becoming ‘The Christian Society of Friends’ makes it obviously religious – and of which kind. Friends themselves know it – so why hide it? This change is not desirable according to another disconnected Friend of ours: “it seems to me to be a rather divisive rather than inclusive move, which to me goes against the Quaker principle of tolerance. Using the term ‘religious’ allows space for people with sympathy towards other faiths or belief systems to join Quakers, whereas ‘Christian’ seems too specific and exclusive. I’d draw comparison with the recent move to allow gay marriage with the Society, as a demonstration of the Quaker principle of inclusivity.”

He goes on to suggest that being labelled Christian might link Quakerism with the excesses of religious extremists of all kinds because others have brought Christianity into disrepute through their dogma and fanatical behaviour. He says:

“I’ve become more and more disenchanted with religious dogma. Muslim extremism is the most obvious concern, but it seems as though America is becoming an increasingly extreme Christian state, despite the constitution separating church and state. It is hard to imagine anyone making it to high office there without being Christian. You just need to look at the recent history of ethnic cleansing in the Balkans, or Rwanda or the current strife in Sudan to see that religion has a lot to answer for. There seems to be something fundamentally wrong with the human psyche which draws us into groups or gangs or tribes or religions all sharing a similar set of beliefs and becoming exclusive then hostile, uncaring and even brutal to outsiders. It’s probably a genetic throwback to our Neanderthal past and at that time may have been a useful defence mechanism. In modern society we really should have learnt to leave our baser instincts behind us and develop more sophisticated and positive

strategies for conviviality, our survival and development as a species. I think it is my strong dislike of religious dogma which has kept me away from Quakers for so long, despite still feeling that I am at heart still a Friend and I still support much of what it stands for. How much better might it be if it shed its Christian base and drew inspiration from the positive and life affirming principles of wider range of faiths?"

Surely, then, retaining the word 'religious' before Society of Friends is just as damning as changing it to Christian? Is my friend not only trying to deny the human reality of being a mammalian primate but also suggesting that the Society should effectively make itself disappear and become an unrecognisable part of society, each one following their own 'inner promptings'? The Society of Friends is stuck with the fact of its membership being primates. It is also stuck with the fact of its Christian roots. It was dissatisfaction with dogma, corruption and malpractice by existing religious organisations that prompted George Fox to stand up and be counted and several hundred years later his followers are still managing to maintain many of the principles that he put forward. My friend's dream for humanity to be truly civilised is indeed the goal of the teaching of Jesus, summed up in the picturesque terms of his preaching, couched in terms to be understood by those around him two thousand years ago, as 'The Kingdom of Heaven' – a term that has become, in parts of many religions, a coded target in pursuit of which includes 'us being in charge', suppression of women, reckless pursuit of money, capital punishment, and torture.

DECLARATION

If The Religious Society of Friends is to have a future in Britain, in my opinion there is no doubt that its cornerstone should be Christianity – the following of the principles put forward by Jesus Christ. As yet we believe that no one has come up with a better formula for successful human behaviour. Quakerism is *our* version of practical Christianity.

After that declaration let's take our theology one step at a time. Once Seekers feel they have found the basic pillars upon which to base their loyalty they are able to listen to, discuss, understand and tolerate the differences in how individual Friends interpret their religion and its beliefs.

To me it is a relief that Friends are not obliged to get hung up on forcing themselves into unquestioning belief in 'Father, Son and Holy Spirit' – or that bread and wine does, or does not magically become something else during Communion, Eucharist or Mass. Or that when we die there will be – or not – consciousness after death, or a period when our bodies lie mouldering until a day when we all spring back to physical life and face judgement. Some Friends, depending on their upbringing and background, may hold beliefs that I personally cannot accept – but what counts is that we all profess to follow the example and advice of Jesus Christ – son of a Jewish carpenter living in an occupied country. We are all on a journey but are not necessarily all at the same stage.

My father was a Church of England parson who came to the priesthood late. I think he had trouble with the orthodoxy of what the church put forward. Reaching the age to attend his confirmation classes I saw for the first time the side of him that helped fill the church pews so successfully – not the tired, frustrated, self-doubting, disciplinarian father who must not be disturbed in his study. I am so grateful to him for giving us a tip at those classes to "Just concentrate on Jesus Christ and what he said, did and meant. Ask yourself, what would he have said or done now – in this age and in these circumstances?" My father told us that to begin with we could leave aside 'theology' and all its minutiae. His approach was simple: base your life on the immediate and direct inspiration that comes from Jesus whose policies, strategies and tactics all stem from love.

When, during the classes, we came to the question of ‘who is God?’ or ‘what is God?’ he directed us to what Jesus taught: that ‘God is love’. Why should we then doubt it? Hence I try not to use the code word ‘God’ but substitute ‘love’ or one of its derivatives such as ‘consideration’, ‘justice’, ‘caring’, ‘affection’ or ‘giving’.

A clear definition of what Quakers believe is easily found in the New Testament. The Society has always believed that Jesus’ message needs to be illuminated and interpreted afresh almost daily. You could encode that by talking about ‘The living Christ’: but coding of that kind is surely one of the weaknesses of many Christian denominations – helping to keep them exclusive: “if you don’t know our codes you aren’t one of us!” The sense, meaning or ‘Spirit’ (this potential codeword can include a capital S or even better, be expanded to ‘Holy Spirit’ to add mystery) of Christ’s message is as applicable now as it ever was and is hence ‘alive’.

Quakers are Christian and believe in love – not a mysterious deity but a practical, positive attitude as described by Christ. George Fox, like Jesus himself and the child who saw that the King’s clothes were not all they might be, cut through all the self-promoting claptrap coming from the power-structured priesthoods and governance of their time to recognise the presence of ‘that of love in everyman’. Shock horror! This is the message that got Christ crucified for his revolutionary impertinence and George Fox beaten up, humiliated and despised. Only the little boy got away with it – his words were heard and the King lost face – to say the least.

By reasserting the Christianity of Quakerism and making it publicly known that we are the ‘Christian Society of Friends’, we clarify our message to other Christians. Those whose personal beliefs cannot accept this can continue their search for a religious home elsewhere.

What next? Surely we need more of the same? What has always inspired Friends is listening to the ‘promptings in our hearts which we know as the light within’. That light has sustained Christianity for the past two thousand years. It helps each of us develop our own interpretation of the guidance and advice offered by the carpenter of Nazareth. Friends have the benefit of not being hung about by dogma – rigid interpretations reached hundreds of years ago by those who had achieved power in their chosen religious group. This freedom gives us the great advantage of being able to listen to interpretations and beliefs of others without feeling obliged to deny or reject them before trying to understand them.

As Friends we each have the freedom to interpret Jesus’ words and come to our own conclusions. Then, at Meeting and within the communal life of the Society we are able to present our thoughts for discussion and development. It gives each of us the chance to discover new light – from within our own experiences and from the thought and experiences of others. My own belief is that the human race still has an immense amount to learn about itself and the environment – and living in global harmony. We cannot claim to know everything – although some denominations behave as if they did.

OPEN-MINDED

Within the Society I believe there is plenty of room for ‘not knowing’. We don’t exclude ourselves from Christianity by being partially agnostic. Some Friends believe in ‘life after death’; others, in re-incarnation; others that ‘eternal life’ means the positive attributes of a person’s lifetime being added to the general advance of civilisation: that the light from someone can illuminate the lives of many others for generations to come and ‘live on’ in humankind for ever. Others believe in consciousness after death – in which one recognises loved ones and rejoins them. Others of us simply ‘don’t know’ – in the same way that we cannot conceptualise the eternity of space. Mankind has so much to learn and so much to understand, despite the amazing steps that have already taken place with scientific and philosophical learning. Why should we have the arrogance of asserting that ‘we know’ about

everything? Do we really believe that coming generations will not make amazing discoveries about how everything works? What if someone proved that reincarnation was a certainty? We are not in a position so far, to be able to deny it. With modern DNA testing and a growing database of behaviour, looks and mannerisms there is increasing evidence that living people may resemble very closely some of their ancestors. Look at the Tibetan beliefs in finding the next Dalai Lama – when small children appear to be able to answer questions to which only the last Dalai Lama could have known the answers. However, many religious groupings demand that we ‘believe’ all kinds of much more unlikely principles, such as those mentioned earlier.

These are often attached to rituals – originally devised to help unsophisticated and uneducated people remember and respect stages of personal development and wisdom. Symbolic washing of the body to celebrate a change in thinking is an example of this. I need not describe many of the others, referred to as ‘sacraments’. Friends attribute more value to changes of thought and behaviour than to such outward symbols.

We do not demand that all Friends toe the same party line. Some Friends and Attenders hold beliefs that may not seem to be in harmony with the Society as a whole – yet we do not reject these people but allow them to continue their search for truth, providing they are prepared to give others in the meeting the love and consideration expected. If they display restraint and a willingness to be open to the thinking of fellow attenders they are accepted as fellow travellers.

Once again the essence of Quakerism shines through: that of self-regulation and self-management, guided and motivated by love.

IN NEED OF RENOVATION?

It would seem that some Friends are worried about our/their future as a society and that the Society of Friends needs a renovation or revitalisation – hence this essay competition. So let’s take a look at what are our weaknesses and strengths, using a simple SWOT analysis. (Strengths and Weakness, Opportunities and Threats analysis.)

Starting with weaknesses – because we shall follow that on a positive note – here are some that I perceive. Other Friends, Attenders, Seekers and Disconnecteds can doubtless add to these lists – and put them in the order of importance to suit their own beliefs:

WEAKNESSES

- **Diffidence:** many Friends undervalue themselves as individuals. There’s a difference between being that – and humble. We need to be fair to ourselves. Older members tend to write themselves off and worry about what will happen to meeting when they die. That’s a mixture of arrogance - because there’s much truth in the saying that ‘no one is indispensable’; and ‘throwing in the towel too easily’. (Although I don’t know of any Quaker boxing clubs).
- **Complacency:** perhaps we assume that everyone knows about Friends and will get in touch if they wish. This complacency may also be related to our diffidence (or arrogance?). It requires effort to overcome the diffidence and be more outgoing.

- **Indolence:** it is comfortable, having found a 'home' for our mental and religious beliefs to settle down and forget other seekers. Our own needs are met but Christians learned from Jesus that the message of love includes offering that love to others who need it. Some Friends have been prompted to 'do something about it' when they see injustice, distress or pain but most of us resist getting involved with the inevitable conflicts it entails. If we do not make the sustaining comfort and peace of our Quaker meeting known and available to others we risk being squeezed out – ignored - in the frenzied rush for material gain and its consequences, which include crime and war. We can't work up the energy to offer our time and attention to being Clerk, or overseer – librarian or part-time cleaner; or attend monthly and other meetings. Hence some meetings fall into the hands of uninspiring and ageing leadership.
- **Ignoring our own advice:** how many Meetings suffer from the Friend or Attender who is 'moved to speak' far too often? The frenzied pace of life and pressure that drives people to seek peace and quiet also raises their adrenalin levels to a degree that even a suspicion of new light causes palpitations and a powerful urge to stand up – and 'share'. Overseers/Clerks/Elders need courage to tackle this problem and must develop kind but effective ways of saying 'shhhhhh'. Too much ministry is what has put me (and others close to me) off going to some meetings.
- **Worrying too much about 'younger members':** the perpetual wail that 'we must recruit more young members' can divert too much energy from creating a society that attracts new members. They will join *when they are ready to do so*. Contemplative meetings or 'services' may not be what many people need to help repair and guide their lives. They may need to sing, to join in spoken prayers – dance even – and listen to sermons, dramas or choral works to enhance their religious life. It may take years of such activity before people begin to seek the inward quiet such as can be found in some Quaker Meetings. We must not forget that 'younger' now includes sixty and seventy-year olds as life expectancy continues to be longer. It may be that Transcendental Meditation can provide a slowing down treatment to the hard-pressed executive or manager. Sociological surveys have shown that the very existence and presence of such meditators in a district can reduce negative factors such as crime, accidents and illness. Other activities such as relaxation classes, physical exercise, music and literature, also help counter the hyper-activity of modern life that diverts us from long-term maturity. Quakerism, I believe, offers more than this because of its proactive Christian principles. It not only develops that calm sense of stillness but also stimulates us to intervene positively in society. Quakerism can be a positive 'further step' to TM. It takes time - sometimes decades - for people to take steps towards contemplative meetings such as those offered by Friends. We must not be too impatient.
- **Speaking in code:** So many religions glibly speak of 'God', 'Holy', 'Grace', 'Blessed' and adopt phrases and words that have a hazy aura of 'goodness' around them. It gives users a feeling of righteousness and comfort to use these words but sends out warning messages to anyone outside that 'holy' inner circle. It declares 'you are not one of us – therefore you are damned!' Despite Friends having worked hard, over the centuries, to use updated language, it is very easy to fall into the trap of

using easy code-words, especially for those of us recently joining from other denominations or who have grown up in Quaker families.

- **Pouncing** on newcomers. Enquirers daring to enter Meeting House doors – an action that may have already taken some courage on their part – are liable to be greeted clumsily. After the first welcome come the questions: ‘And do you have *children?*’ ‘What do you do? What does your husband do?’ You may be bludgeoned in to staying on afterwards for a cup of staff-room coffee and digestive biscuits when a squad of well-meaning stalwarts set upon you – when all you wanted was to be insignificant, at least until you felt you knew more about ‘what Quakers are’. Self-management by welcomers can be forgotten in the excitement of recruiting a new member – possibly even one with children! My disconnected friend commented on this, too: “After we moved ... we continued to attend [our old meeting] for several years, maintaining our attachment to the Friends we knew there, but we began to feel that we really ought to give [a nearby meeting] a try as it is within walking distance of our home. We duly turned up one Sunday morning and were welcomed. Afterwards an over-enthusiastic Friend came up to [my wife] and asked if we would be coming the following week as they were looking for someone to take the children’s class. We never went back. There really is something about Friends needing to learn to develop a greater empathy with others, not simply going about their processes.” We had a similar experience. We were looking for a new meeting soon after moving house and visited the nearest. The clerk’s first question to my wife was ‘and what does your husband do?’ That was the last visit we made there! She feared that her experience of a previous meeting might be repeated. In her own words “I had to be careful not to get trampled by the old biddies as they pushed past to get to you!” Men were in a minority at that meeting. One didn’t have to be glamorous to attract female attention – ability to move chairs and unblock gutters was highly valued.
- **Missing the point.** Most of us are frantically trying to make a living in ever more competitive times. Whether it’s good for us or not we are unable attend Meeting *every Sunday*. It may be that we can manage to squeeze Meeting in once a month – or even less. That does not mean that we are half-hearted about being part of the meeting or needing its love. I may be wildly out of date but when we belonged to a meeting our temporary disappearances did not appear to be even noticed – just at a time when we needed support. Meetings did not seem to be able to cope with Frenzied Friends – is it still the case today? We lose touch with many who would, given sustaining care, go on to be active Friends – for example school-leavers, attenders moving away and couples splitting up.

THREATS

- **We could fizzle out** and our unique message could be lost.
- **We could lose our identity** and be engulfed by another movement.

- **We could be left behind by other denominations** that are quicker in reflecting modern needs.
- **We could be left with buildings in the wrong place** and nothing to do.
- **We could become a talking shop** – a kind of ‘ethics council’ given over to talking rather than contemplating and cherishing new light and insights.
- **We could become increasingly detached from real society.** As my disconnected Friend puts it: “One of the things I liked about [the previous] meeting was that there were weighty Friends there who lived normal ‘commercial’ lives. What I mean is that they were equally influential in business as they were in the Society. Examples that spring to mind were Friends who were successful in insurance, accounting, manufacturing - or whatever - and who were robust, straightforward and outspoken in their dealings, demonstrating a real awareness of what life is like in the world of business for most people *but* at the same time also being sympathetic and caring Friends. Over the years they all disappeared for various reasons and the ‘personality’ of the meeting changed seeming to attract more teachers, librarians, social workers and others in the ‘social’ professions rather than from business. As time passed the meeting seemed to me to become more detached from what I viewed as the ‘real world’ that ordinary working people experience, and thereby less relevant to me and my world.”

STRENGTHS

- **We have the teachings and advice of Jesus of Nazareth**
- **We proclaim love as an essential precept for living**
- **We demand peace instead of violence**
- **We each take the responsibility of priesthood**
- **We form a living community giving collective support and leadership**
- **We have a form of religious celebration that is never the same twice**
- **We recognise the validity of race, gender, age sexuality and beliefs of others**
- **We cherish a set of beliefs and ways of life that people would love to find**
- **We are prepared to be controversial and have been so over the centuries**
- **We have a good track record in social reform and scientific discovery**
- **We look for and find ‘new light’ as an ongoing process**
- **There are still thousands of us in the UK – including some ‘disconnecteds’**

- **There are thousands who are seeking such as we have to offer them**
- **We have enormous potential to welcome new members**
- **We have Friends' Schools**
- **We tend to be 'better off' well resourced**
- **We are not afraid to learn from other organisations and individuals**

WHAT CAN WE SAY - AND DO?

What then can we say that will guide Quakerism over the coming decades?

**** Take heart! We are on the right path – let's have more of the same***

Friends have always come up with fresh and appealing ideas. New challenges to society arise all the time and we develop 'Quaker views' and strategies to deal with, for example, our relationship with Islam; our view of international peace-keeping and justice; our view on what we eat, drink or refrain from; our view on euthanasia. (I may well have missed recent declarations on these subjects.)

**** Have more confidence in our message***

It seems to be diffidence that has led to this competition being held. The reduction in numbers has undermined the Society's confidence in itself. Dare I suggest that Friends become bolder? By that I mean openly proud and confident in the concepts and practice of Quakerism; not being afraid to answer back; taking a more active part in national debates; not hiding our membership of the Society; making use of all the modern media.

**** Harvest new light from living sources***

We have always sought new light in current writings and I for one have found the writings of Louise Hay helpful in respect of self-confidence and morale. Her use of affirmations (such as *I approve of myself*) to lift oppression of guilt, anger and other such unhealthy states can help boost individual and group confidence and energy. (Look her up on the internet.) Insights offered by Archbishop Tutu, Nelson Mandela and other living saints can easily be added to updated Quaker literature, web-links and blogs.

**** Have a good Spring Clean***

Let's admit there's much we could do to spruce up the Society of Friends. If only we put into action those things that we talk about so much and tell each other so often. Something must be putting new members off from joining! Let's look to see what it might be, by carrying out a SWOT analysis, as described above, for each part of the Society – at local meetings, monthly, yearly and other meetings – each one examining itself positively and then preparing a 'renovation plan'.

**** Face the facts***

We can learn much from other denominations and faiths. For example, look at how the Methodists and other non-conformist churches have adapted to falling numbers of weekly attenders. They have merged groups into larger ones, using one main central building, which is then renovated to be useful for many kinds of social function, made warm and congenial

and much less of a burden than the chilly churches, chapels and places of worship. They have changed meeting patterns to fit in with peoples' lives. Friends have shown a good example by sharing buildings with other religions and organisations. Some churches – like the Church of England and the Catholic Church offer a range of different services to suit the beliefs and 'life-stage' of their members. These can vary from religious rock festivals to high mass, or silent prayer meetings. For Episcopal churches a monthly choral evensong or hymn singing may nurture musical groups of all kinds. Perhaps Friends could hold extra meetings of this nature while cherishing our silent meetings as the core of our communal worship? House groups are where Friends started – may be it's time to have them again? Finding them might not be difficult, using the internet.

**** We must have better thought-out welcome systems***

Some churches and religious groups have better thought-out welcome systems. We have discussed being pounced on by Friends who make one embarrassed when what one is seeking is to creep in to a back seat with the least fuss. At some churches there's a ritual of queuing to exit – everyone shaking the hand of the priest and being questioned about their personal details and family. Equally, Seekers often complain that no one spoke to them or offered them any kind of information. That's true not only of Quaker meetings but in all denominations. Somehow we need to develop a more sensitive and flexible welcome system to meet everyone's needs. Recently a Seeker (woman - 34 years old whom we know well) began attending a lunchtime Friend's Meeting in London. She says she gave up because so many 'weirdoes' dominated the proceedings with incoherent ministry. That meeting needs some kind of filtering system in their welcome that can divert and guide troubled souls who are desperate for attention and love.

**** Be more courageous***

Telling the over-voluble Friend to somehow limit their contributions to a meeting that cringes each time he or she stands up requires a great deal of sensitivity and courage. So does being 'political' when appropriate – speaking out against or for local, national or international politicians and their movements. We need to make well-publicised announcements to launch new documents such as 'A Quaker view of.....'; providing gifted spokesmen and women for interview in following up such launches and political activity – if necessary training Friends in how to face the media. One recent example was when Friends declared their willingness to conduct same-sex marriages. To me it showed courage and leadership. Why shouldn't gay couples treasure that unique marriage certificate that, as far as I know, only Quakers have. It is one of the few outwards signs of inward commitment in which we indulge and we still enjoy reminding ourselves of who was present at our (in this case heterosexual) marriage and remember how some of our children slept peacefully during the silence. The list of names is visual evidence of those people who were wishing us well in our new status. This custom may appear quaint to some – but attractive to some seekers and perhaps we should use it in some of our marketing?

**** Be more creative***

Meetings need to learn how they can participate and provide support in the local community. During a very unhappy period of my life when a foolish marriage was crumbling, our local meeting seemed to have nothing to give by way of help or support. It seemed too embarrassing a subject for them to discuss – and one got the feeling that they wanted to 'be fair to both sides', while holding one at arm's length. If each of us is a 'priest' we must be prepared to 'be there' in times such as that.

A short weekday lunchtime meeting can provide a haven for pressurised office workers. That's not new – Westminster Meeting, for example has always done this. But how about a webcam permanently showing an open, supervised meeting house somewhere so that one could go on-line and participate via a computer keyboard and screen. Planning such a concept would need careful thought – and may already be in existence. Meetings for Elders, Overseers and others could take place on Skype – or at least be convened electronically so that members can participate without travel.

Friends need to adjust meeting times and days to cater for Frenzied as well as Cool Friends. More widely-spaced meetings in both time and distance would enable more people to find Quakerism more accessible *in their lives*. They would not feel pressured to 'attend weekly – here' – or feel guilty.

*** *Present an attractive face and market it***

If the general public get the impression that Quakers are an amorphous bunch of people 'one-step-back' from the reality of the harshness of life we are unlikely to get the healthy mix of professional, commercial, academic, scientific, retired and less well-educated membership. Once we have our messages clear in our own minds, then we should market them, using modern techniques to suit the expectations of all the strata of our nations.

*** *Get down to business***

My fellow disconnected friend raises the following points: "A key challenge for the future of Quakerism is how to connect with people leading normal business lives. I think there is huge potential to demonstrate another way of doing business which is more inclusive, constructive, socially responsible and ultimately more successful than the standard shareholder driven business model. Quakers just need to look at their way of doing things and work out ways of applying their philosophy to business." He goes on to give examples of companies that although not necessarily started by Quakers, follow similar codes of behaviour. He starts by discussing research he made about the John Lewis Partnership, which retails, farms and processes: "What I discovered was that this huge and successful company was in effect wholly owned by the people who worked in it rather than shareholders, and every 'partner' could stand for election to their structure of councils, or even the main Board, thereby having real influence in the way the company is run." He found this such a sensible and humane, almost Quakerly arrangement, that he wondered why so few other companies do the same. "If Quakers ran a business (and they used to be very influential in business – Cadbury, Rowntree, Clarks, Barclays and others) I think the John Lewis model would be very close to the one they should adopt. Interestingly though the key thing that has protected John Lewis is its trust ownership structure which stops any form of shareholder or hostile buy-out and this is something which the old Quaker businesses never adopted, remaining private family owned or shareholder owned and thus eventually losing any sense of their identity and Quaker roots."

He says there are a handful of other companies who have taken the brave step of handing over their ownership and management to the workers who give their lives to building the wealth of the business – The Co-Op, Ove Arup, Carl Zeiss and Scott Bader – to name a few but they remain very much in the minority. "The business world is dominated by rich absentee financiers and shareholders who reap the rewards of the work done by the employees in companies. It's time Quakers got involved and brought balance into this equation, recognising that people contributing their working lives to companies are at least as valuable as those who lend their money."

He then makes the point with which *The Religious Society of Friends in Britain* is currently wrestling: “Thoughts of John Lewis bring me to [conclude] that in religion and other areas, there is a history of great movements being initiated by one charismatic visionary who sees the world in a different way from his peers and creates something new and perhaps revolutionary. As time goes on their message becomes diluted or less relevant, or their once revolutionary thoughts become so mainstream that the movement begins to lack differentiation. Stagnation and routine set in. Religious movements are obvious examples, but the John Lewis business model is another, where the staggeringly revolutionary insight of one man nearly 100 years ago brought about such a radical change in the way people did business.” He said the challenge was to keep the revolution alive rather than let things slip into the ruthless, greedy and frantic behaviour of ‘Western-style’ capitalism.

CONCLUSION

This is an ongoing part of Quaker life – thinking about what comes next. Friends have enormous strengths. In general they are older members of society – but so will most people be, before long – and Quaker ways and meetings are often discovered by those seeking a religious home, later in the journey. ‘The young’ go to what takes their fancy or interest and usually resist that which is pushed at them. We should do what we do – better and as much in accordance with modern ways of living as possible. We should do what we can to make the Society more visible, approachable and more definite in what it represents. We should be more sensitive to the needs of enquirers – physically when they come through the meetinghouse door; electronically when they access Friends’ websites or blogs; and in writing through directories, leaflets and literature.

The world is currently going through various crises: banking, food security, pandemics, climate change, religious extremism, poverty – hunger and obesity. Quakerism’s Christian message offers practical strategies and advice in tackling all of these and has the flexibility to be able to offer these in acceptable ways to thinking people. Quakerism works well in conjunction with other faiths for the common good without threatening them – and could attract many thousands more members from among those in the United Kingdom who have not yet found a spiritual home. We, as the ‘living surface’ of mankind need to live in peace without destroying the environment on which we depend. We as the living surface of Quakerism are in a position to contribute to such peace and survival.

To finish: an interpretation of The Lord’s Prayer:

Affirmation of Jesus

We treasure the love that brings
Contentment; always prevailing;
Here, now, everywhere, always.
Providing our needs, allowing our faults as we allow those of others -
May it lead us from folly and
Direct us towards the light.

Amen