

Faith, Hope, Charity and our Quaker Voice: The Future of the Religious Society of Friends in Britain

If I had started this essay when I first read of it in mid-July, I would have focussed first of all on the aging membership of the Society of Friends, the net loss of members nearly every year and its potential demise within a decade or two. But that was before Yearly Meeting Gathering (YMG) 2009. How could any gathering of such a vibrant, involved, friendly, all-age community be a Society in terminal decline? No, the diminishing membership numbers and the preponderance within it of the over-60s is the current picture of nearly every long-standing organisation in this country – the traditional churches, the clubs that aim to serve, many charities, even sports and social clubs – all trying to attract the under-50s, find trustees, officers and volunteers. That is just the national scene at the moment and, whilst that scene lasts, the Society of Friends has to live with it.

Introduction

In the process of writing this essay it has repeatedly been so much easier to define the problems and pose the questions than come up with any answers. Promising a hoped-for change in western society as a whole is easier than suggesting ways that our Society could be the catalyst for that bigger change. We would have to admit that we are not brilliant at embracing change but, historically, individual Quakers have been strongly influential in the forefront of social development. So the answers may not be in our Society of Friends as a whole but in the backing and encouragement, education, finance and support that we give to individual Quakers who might make a difference.

Plan

The shape of the essay has been difficult to create because of the inter-relatedness of the issues, but it will start with a consideration of what we believe and how we express that, a look at our declining membership, at finance and at Quakers globally. The last word is our Quaker voice. The three large headings through the essay – Faith, Hope and Charity – reflect the fact that these are three cornerstones of a religious society and it is our Quaker voice that makes the fourth, giving us a distinctive structure – strong, adaptable and built to last.

...../Faith

FAITH

So the first issue to tackle is our vagueness about what we believe.

‘We dance round in a ring and suppose,

The Secret sits in the middle and knows.’ (*Robert Frost*)

No-one who reads the Friend can ignore the debate going on about what it is that Quakers believe and how we express this, but we should not over-react - it is still a majority of Friends who do *not* read the Friend, who simply attend their local meeting regularly and may be quite unaware of theism, atheism, non-theism and the nuances of language that may or may not disturb. It is not a new debate - there are many who have become Quakers over the last fifty years who have at all times rejected the idea of a deity, or have an eclectic acquaintance with many religions and yet find their spiritual lives satisfied and enriched within the Society. Older essays and Swarthmore lectures refer to debates of what we believe and come to different conclusions in different decades.

The debate heats up

The debate has however, grown in intensity recently as the balance changes between those of us from a Christian up-bringing, whether within the Society or as refugees from other churches, and those who have no such background. For some of the latter our Christocentric and theistic language may be unintelligible at best, alienating at worst and perhaps to the majority just irritating and distracting. It is these people particularly who recognise their spiritual need but are not quite finding it met, either within the Society or outside it.

They are not a threat to our history and traditions, despite the alleged whirr of George Fox turning in his grave, but a challenge to our testament of equality. We need to address this debate in the same terms that other equality issues have been addressed – in looking closely at the words we use and the prejudices hidden behind them and tackling this with education, patience and time.

An on-going argument about what we do and don't believe may be damaging to the outside world's opinion of us - hence the elaborate and contentious effort of Meeting for Sufferings to describe our theology in a way that is understandable to academic Christian theologians and acceptable to other churches – yet is barely recognisable to many of us. When has it ever worried Friends in the past what others think of us? See how boldly the spirit made us lead the way at YMG 2009 in the equality of same sex partnerships. We should embrace the challenge of the membership whose religious beliefs may not recognise a deity but whose spiritual nature has found a home here.

Where the debate might go

A contributor to the correspondence in the Friend, said that our Quakerism is large enough to contain the whole range of our beliefs, simply within the definition ‘I am a Quaker’. That must be what we strive to achieve and in time the issue will become

familiar enough that it can be thrashed out at Meeting for Sufferings and at Area and Local Meetings and then at Yearly Meeting too.

At present there are many who find the challenge threatening and will not be ready for these discussions. To help them the threat can be reduced if the issue is seen first as one of language. All the language in the world is only human and its limits are our human limitations. No words are adequate to describe that enormity and power that just rarely, in the silence, we can glimpse. 'Rarely, rarely comest Thou, Spirit of Delight.' (*Shelley, quoted in this year's Swarthmore Lecture.*)

It is that Spirit which we struggle to define or describe or deny. It needs to become part of our discipline that, just like ministry, we receive each other's language 'in a tender and creative spirit. Reach for the meaning deep within it' (*Advices and Queries no. 12*). We must strive to catch the glimpses of the Spirit of Delight when we can and love them, recognising that, for each person, describing them is a hurdle that we each meet in a different way, not a test of faith.

...../Hope

HOPE

The declining numbers

I am hopeful that the debate of belief and language, though heated at times, will resolve as the balance between old and less old continues to change and that the fervour will one day be looked back on as rather naïve, compared with whatever challenges the Society next.

I want to return now to the question of numbers, because that also is to me a matter for hope. I have said that it reflects what is happening throughout our communities in the UK and that will in time change.

Over-committed time – under-committed people

The total absorption in work of the present working population, the struggle to cover living costs for nearly everyone and the pressure to meet child-care needs within the family whilst being also in paid work is a phase. It appears to be a necessity but the next generation of adults will tire of it and seek something different. They will rediscover their need for community life and the satisfaction of service. Already many young people in the 16 to 20 age group are offering themselves for voluntary work during their education or whilst looking for employment. They like feeling good about themselves, they are critical of their parents' drive for a decent income and they idealistically are aware that that is not necessarily what this life is about.

It is partly a result of the excessive demands that are made on the time of many people, whether working or newly retired, that makes them reluctant to commit themselves wholeheartedly to organisations – their priorities are elsewhere and especially where the demand seems most pressing and/or most rewarding.

Attendees

The Society's membership is decreasing, reducing the number of people expected to take responsibility but its number of attendees, whilst lower than 10 years ago, is high. There is as much being asked of regular attendees, of necessity, as of members, thus making little distinction between them and little purpose in becoming a member of the Society. This may be an issue that needs addressing but not here.

In addition, most Meetings have more than the declared number of attendees because many come so intermittently that they are not counted in the Tabular Statement but who nevertheless value the Society and think of themselves as Quakers. Their infrequent attendance may be for many reasons but one reason for some will be a fear of being asked for commitment and this is found in many other organisations too. In our Society we must be there for them, support and encourage them and some of them will one day be transformed into the committed.

Holding Office in the Society

This fearfulness of commitment and the time that such commitment might demand is only one of the factors in the shortage of officers and trustees in most organisations. Another is the ever-increasing burden of legislation and litigation - spectres held up to us all, to warn us of disastrous consequences – which makes even the most willing volunteer quake! It is increasingly necessary to have access to expert advice.

So what solutions are there?

- Buying in professional book-keeping can make a treasurer's job tolerable but a Friend to oversee the finances is still necessary.
- Appointing a professional child-care worker to lead the children's work at larger meetings makes it much easier to find helpers for the children's meeting – but a Friend to be the Children and Young People's Advocate is still necessary.
- Using an agency to manage property-letting is now common practice where Meetings own residential property but does not remove the overall responsibility that trustees carry.
- Registering as an Incorporated Charitable Organisation, when this becomes possible, would limit the liability of trustees, making it less daunting to be one. The legal process for this is proving far slower than promised.
- Investing in training for potential office-holders raises their confidence and increases their commitment.

Doing all this will help but until there is a shift in the way people wish to use their time, there will continue to be a shortage of those willing to take on the demands of responsibility.

Young adults

There is plenty of evidence that younger people are seeking to fill a spiritual vacuum in their lives. At present it sometimes takes the form of worshipping the dead – see how young people have restructured funerals and invented funerary rites – and of ancestor worship – watch programmes of celebrities weeping as they discover their antecedents' tragedies – and one can see the yawning gulf that is crying out to be filled. Who will catch their imaginations and fill it? An evangelical church? Their paid job? A para-military organisation? A sport? A local gang? Or will we let them go on drowning it, drinking themselves insensible on Friday and Saturday nights?

It is not very likely that the Society of Friends is going to be a big contender as the gap-filler but some of the causes that we embrace have popular appeal and we could be the influence that brings simplicity and integrity to those causes that would attract a crowd. Can we focus the energies we expend on peace demonstrations or climate control to plan effective publicity, embracing the internet as a means of

communication and then instilling discipline on the resulting crowd? It does not sound our forte but it is the way we need to go. If we can, some of those seeking a purpose in life will find it.

Our exploitation of technology needs to be speeded up – it is happening slowly but it is not well known. How many of us can point our younger enquirers accurately and confidently towards the national Quaker website, or even that of our own Meeting? Whilst many of us find it hard to conceive of a blog as a substitute for our silent meeting for worship, nor an interactive tutorial (available, apparently, in any language you choose) as a substitute for our restful centres for education, but that is not how busy young Friends see it. We are not the only church to be slow off the mark in this way but the evangelical churches, especially those whose roots are in the States, are streets ahead. And which are the growing churches? Why, precisely those same ones.

Supporting our young.

The gradual involvement of professional child care workers in our larger meetings may pay dividends – they know what children of different ages want. Present day children are technologically more sophisticated than most of our members and the outdated but still much-used ‘hear a story and draw it’ technique (which I admit to hating 60 years ago as a Sunday School child) is not going to compete with other Sunday morning attractions nor be acceptable as a topic to tell their peers. Where are our interactive teaching tools, our internet sites for very young people, our cartoon characters to illustrate life choices and so on? This is an area that must be taken forward fast – and by young Quakers not by older Friends, who can only guess at what will catch young imaginations.

Global Quakers

Many struggling churches, and indeed other organisations (such as the service clubs, eg. Rotary, that I have cited as similarly declining in number in this country) are growing world-wide, especially in Africa and Asia. For the churches though, some of these growing branches are barely recognisable, not, as one might expect, because they are bold and adventurous in new directions but because of their zealous desire to return to the roots of their denomination and the traditional rules and practices of its early days – truly fundamentalist. The Society of Friends is no different and it is clear from reading the Yearly Meeting Epistles that the range of Quaker faith and practice within the world is from one extreme - silent meetings and low-key eldership and oversight - to the other - evangelical programmed meetings of great fervour, employing paid ministers and strict rules.

There is a valid view that fundamentalist churches of whatever denomination are closer to each other than they are to their liberalist fellows and that eventual schism is

inevitable – schism, that is, between fundamentalist and liberal ends of their spectra. This may have a beneficial solidifying effect of unifying some of the denominations under one or other of these two banners but schism is still regrettable, especially when the split may occur along geographical or cultural boundaries, creating deep and dangerous chasms. It could happen to us. We need to strive to maintain a global Society as long as we can but our western gallop to embrace our own liberalism may make us intolerable to conservative Friends worldwide and schism may be thrust upon us.

The work of the Society of Friends in the world is our witness to our testimonies and has a long history of being valued by society in general. It is this for which we are known and respected. It must continue but its funding is vulnerable – a lead-in to discussing finance.

...../Charity

CHARITY

In my optimism that our declining numbers will change as society in this country changes, I have not put forward a programme for outreach. This is not because it is not essential but because it is already being done from Friends house and, gradually, by many Meetings. There has been a marked change from the situation a very few years ago, where the term 'outreach' had not even been heard. It is now at least an annual effort by most Meetings and is gradually becoming a part of our culture.

Thus the Society of Friends in this country, though it moves slowly, is changing all the time and the introduction of charitable status, trustees taking on the management role, the change to a visionary role for Meeting for Sufferings all seem to be working well so far. The Framework for Action is a great development which, if we use it, will consolidate our efforts at Local Meetings, Area Meetings, nationally and internationally.

Finance

Declining membership inevitably means declining income. Recession leads to fewer large donations and bequests and an aging membership, at a time of low interest rates, causes a decline in available money for charitable giving. All these factors are in operation now. The Stewardship Committee is worried about this and wants the word to be spread that more generous giving from every Friend who can is vital if we are to ensure that Quaker work in the world is not curtailed at a time when it is most needed – when peace is a rarity, where global recession is hitting the poorest populations most and where climate change is making good land and resources more fought over than ever. But exhortations to give more may fall on stony ground. We must cultivate innovatively other sources of income.

Maximising the use of our Meeting Houses

Many Meetings' funds are kept healthy through the community letting of their meeting houses. Yet many Meetings are worried and over-burdened with the strain of managing their property. There is a minority view that, in the interests of simplicity, we should cease to own meeting houses but that is a negative way of tackling the problem, which would take away much of our potential revenue and all of our opportunities to accommodate and support our local community.

The positive way is to consider setting up a central property managing business or a few such regional businesses. It would have:

- Expertise concentrated in one place and available
- Contractors - these can be small local businesses not necessarily big national companies - to deal with building maintenance and development.

- Lettings overseers who set good practice policies and ensure that legal requirements are met.

Revenue could be optimised by contracting nationally with an agency that needs small accommodation in many towns (for example one of the many slimming chains) so that, when setting up in a new place, they first try for accommodation at the Quaker meeting house.

It would not be obligatory for meeting houses to use the services of this Quaker property company but over time it may well become the norm. The benefits for the Local and Area Meetings who do would be:

- the economy of scale reducing costs
- the release from tasks that are beyond them
- the improved income from maximising lettings.

The benefit for the Property Managing Business would be an income generated by a modest registration fee from the Area Meetings who use the service and from taking a percentage of the lettings income from each property registered.

Extending the business further to manage the properties of other churches or voluntary organisations may greatly increase its capacity to generate revenue. Quakers have a tradition of being successful in business and forward thinking too and this sort of business may prove to be an effective source of income to the Society and a service to its Meetings.

Other Social Enterprises

Friends House has already developed its hospitality services to create income. Other large meeting houses do this in a variety of ways that could form a model for smaller Meeting Houses in central positions in towns – opening cafés, offering (and charging modestly for) simple accommodation, small conference bases with catering included – could all be possible if the expertise were available to set them up and oversee their management. Providing that expertise could become a business in itself.

Professional skills

At one time most Area Meetings had in their membership professionals with appropriate skills to serve the Meeting's needs but now the numbers who are still working are small and they are under such pressures in their professional lives that they cannot give their services. Those who are retired may be quickly swamped and soon become aware that their advice is fast going out of date. Many who have been our back-stops for years are dying. So there is a need for a social enterprise offering expert assistance to Meetings throughout the country:

- Book-keeping services to meetings
- Human resources services to those who employ wardens and managers
- Legal advice
- Property management (as above)
- Extension of these services to other churches and small organisations.

It would not have a large revenue because its income would have to come from registration by the Meetings who make use of it but if it was run as an extension to the work of the specialist departments at Friends House then it does have potential to solve some of the practical problems of a diminishing pool of voluntary experts.

Discipline

When I mentioned the Framework for Action above, I said ‘if we use it’. We have within the Society of Friends so many good organs of advice, exhortation, education, training, refreshment but so many of us fail to make use of them. This is again partly because of our priorities in the way we use our time and energy, partly issues of travel but mainly because we lack discipline. We do not lay down expectations that Friends should undergo training for their roles within the Society – and we fear that, if we were to do so, it would further reduce the already small pool of those willing to take on those roles. Eldership now is a damp squib compared with that of our Victorian forebears but so is discipline generally in this country.

This is not something to beat our breasts and lament about as it simply reflects society at large (in a similar way to that of diminishing numbers) and I am sure this commonality is a cause for hope. There will eventually be a swing away from so much freedom – indeed the recognition of the need to curb it is already here. What is lacking is the social hierarchy to impose discipline effectively. At present the laws and mores are demanded and imposed by whoever shouts loud enough through the media. The resultant effects - our over-crowded prisons, over-stuffed statute books and overseen lives - is against everything that Quakers stand for. Historically society as a whole does eventually relearn what is effective and how to instil it but not usually until it has suffered great hardship through war or pestilence, during which injustices have been perpetrated on all sides. Can anyone influence this process so that what should happen can be achieved without such pain?

When we as a Society recognise that we are failing to instil our own disciplines, have we lost the means to influence the community around us? Is there wisdom in our own past that could help everyone?.....The questions are much easier to pose than to answer – and in truth I have no solution to offer for the lack of discipline within western society as a whole, only that first we should try to put our own house in order and see what might flow from there!

Education

To tackle our own need for discipline within the Society, our starting point should be education – if one understands the reason for a system one may more willingly comply with it. Quakers have a good history of education and there is a wealth of it on offer. It is every Meeting's duty to encourage and assist those enquiring about Quakerism, those attending Meetings, those applying for membership and those taking office to attend the excellent courses that are available to them and keep the flow of people educated in Quaker ways, inspired and informed.

What we lack now is the time and commitment (and sometimes money) to take up what is on offer. We might change this if we follow the business world - set standards that we expect members to meet with regard to attending courses by allocating each new member a budget to cover fees and expenses. Most Meetings have trust funds for the poor or for education that are hardly ever used and this would be an excellent way to bring them back into action. This would set up an expectation of learning without the unacceptable pressure of saying 'Thou shalt learn'. It needs a shift of expectation and planning but it is not impossible.

If we set this up as a model and it works, we can broadcast it to other organisations, large and small. It may not transform society but it will show the way.

...../ **Our Quaker Voice**

And finally, OUR QUAKER VOICE

For the Society to have a healthy future it needs challenges to test its capacity to preach its testimonies. It has made protest against war and weapons and armament manufacture but nothing that grabbed history like the abolition of the slave trade – yet that is not really remembered as a Quaker triumph, just that Quakers were there in amongst it. The camp on Greenham common was famous but it is remembered now as a women’s struggle for peace, not a Quaker one.

Nevertheless, the general public in this country, when asked what they know about Quakers (apart from the erroneous confusion with porridge) know of our pacifism and of Elizabeth Fry and sometimes of our reputation for effectiveness and fairness and involvement in social change.

Will the boldness of our decision at YMG this summer of 2009 to treat all committed relationships equally give us an influential voice, leading the way for other churches, other faiths, other countries and the law? Or will the slow pace of making change actually happen mean it was a 9-day wonder, hitting the headlines and vanishing. Will we face the inevitable criticism and even damnation that making this change will call forth, boldly as our forefathers would have done, or will we wilt and compromise? No – this decision was taken in the faith of the working of the Spirit and in that faith we can be courageous and know that our testimonies are good and our voice must be heard.

If we take that as a model, focus our efforts on the next single matter needing attention and prepare the way for the Spirit to lead us, we can make our Quaker voice heard.
