

**Friends Quarterly Prize Essay Competition:
Regarding the Future of the Religious Society of Friends in Britain**

(6050 words)

A Chinese sage once wrote that there is nothing certain except change - and in the 150 years since John S. Rowntree's essay on the future of the Society of Friends, change has totally transformed the world.

In J. S. Rowntree's day, people travelled by foot, horse drawn vehicles, by steam trains or sailing ships over long distances, they lit their homes by candles or gaslight and they communicated by the spoken word or written letters and essays, whilst, in Friends Meetings, men and women met at separate Meetings for Worship. Womens' Meeting Concerns had to be passed on via the Clerk of the Mens' Meetings (and thereby, some Concerns probably went no further).

Nevertheless, for the men of the Society of Friends, it was a time of great opportunity: the Test and Corporation Acts had been repealed in 1828 and for the first time, a young man who belonged to a Nonconformist (or Catholic) church did not need to swear that he was in communion with the Church of England to gain a university education or to stand as a candidate in local or general Elections (assuming, of course, that he met the property qualifications).

At the same time, life for many people was still 'nasty, brutish and short'. Antibiotics were nearly one hundred years in the future, a quarter of children never lived to see their 6th birthdays and many took their mothers to the grave with them at their birth; the working week was long and harsh (Scrooge may have been a caricature, but he was a recognisable one) and most working men made only a pittance – an officer at the time of the Boer War was heard to say that the best recruiting sergeant he knew was hunger.

The gap between the quality of life of the rich and the very poor, as well as the gap between their incomes, was immeasurably large, as evidenced by the (somewhat later) philanthropic idea of building the Bourneville model village for workers at the Cadbury

chocolate factory. Once it was completed, Cadbury's realised that they did not pay their workers enough for them to be able to rent homes there!

150 years on, the world has changed beyond recognition: people travel by various forms of motorised vehicles, and aircraft largely take the place of shipping for passenger transport. We light our homes by electricity and we communicate as much by electronic media as we do by the spoken word. Few people write letters by hand any more, as a letter posted to, say, Australia, can take up to 2 weeks to arrive, whilst the same letter, sent by e-mail can arrive only seconds later – and a reply received only seconds after that..

However, sadly, the gap between the rich and the poor, after narrowing in the 1960's and 70's has widened again and now stands much as it did in J. S. Rowntree's day.

England must be one of the few countries in the world to have experienced no fewer than three Civil Wars in a 500 year period, the first two being between various contenders as to who should wear the Crown, but the third, being about the rights and responsibilities of a monarch, as well as having a major religious dimension, was dignified by the title of *The Civil War*.

It was out of the religious and political ferment of those times that the Society of Friends was formed. In the mid-seventeenth century, under the Commonwealth, the Puritans gained a considerable say in politics. Many were dour zealots who would probably fit in well amongst today's Taliban. They closed theatres on grounds of 'lewdness' and cancelled Christmas because they thought it wrong to hold parties, especially on Holy days. Unsurprisingly, the Restoration was followed by a period of unbridled hedonism.

In effect, the religious element of the Civil War revolved around whether the monarch, as Head of the Church of England, could, or should, control what people believed. What the Puritans wanted, was what would today be called liberty of conscience, the right to be able to worship in their own manner, without State interference. Of course, they did not want this same liberty to be given to the ceremonially-inclined, Romeward-looking Catholics, or to the proto-communist Levellers and, indeed, the Leveller movement was soon smashed, whilst the Catholics were legislated against and those laws also applied to the early nonconformists, such as the Quakers and the Baptists, probably due to their insistence on rendering unto God what was God's, rather than to the current King.

George Fox, a young man who spent a lot of time thinking about the spiritual life, found himself unsatisfied by dogma, and disillusioned by pastors who could spout the words but not care for the spiritual or secular wellbeing of their flocks, so he turned to the Bible and there found someone who could 'speak to his condition': Jesus. The Society of Friends grew out of an unequivocally Christian understanding of religion, but it was a very different Christianity than was generally practised, then – or now.

Although George Fox seems to have been a natural puritan, he also recognised that there was more to life than hard work, or pure pleasure, and that the soul also had to be nourished. He turned to the Bible for that nourishment, but his reason for ignoring Christmas and Sundays was not the same as the majority of Puritans. He thought that special holy days were irrelevant because *every* day was holy. People could contact and be enfolded in the love of God every day, they did not need to set aside a special place or a day such as Sunday.

Fox's Christianity truly believed that God made humanity in God's own image and likeness, so that just as Jesus was the Son of God, so all humanity are God's Sons and Daughters and therefore each of us has that spark of God-ness within us. It took seriously Jesus' command not to swear oaths, and his blessings on the poor, the merciful, the sorrowful, the peacemakers and the persecuted and also, whilst paying heed to the Ten Commandments, it also honoured Jesus' two commandments: Love God *and* love your neighbour, even when they are your enemy.

It was a Christianity which believed fervently that when Jesus said " ... when I was hungry, you gave me food, when thirsty, you gave me drink; when I was a stranger, you took me into your home, when naked, you clothed me; when I was ill, you came to my help, when in prison, you visited me " he was referring to a way of living which would bring God's Kingdom to fruition on this earth.

The Christianity of George Fox and his immediate followers has been rediscovered a number of times, both before and since, for example, in the 'Liberation Theology' of Latin American Catholicism and then, most recently in a book entitled "Writing in the Sand", by

an American psychotherapist, Thomas Moore. However, Fox's genius did only not lie in his discovery of how to live the Kingdom, but in his ability to teach it to others.

Unfortunately for early Friends, the politicians of the secular Kingdom decided that trying to establish God's Kingdom on earth was a form of treason and, along with the Catholics (for different reasons) Friends became subject to a number of penal laws, which led them into the period known as 'quietism' and, seemingly, the loss of the ability to teach others about Fox's momentous discovery of how to live the Kingdom.

The Penal Laws of the 18th century took the zeal out of the Society of Friends, as they were likely meant to do, but they also forced 18th century Friends to take a long, hard and uncompromising look at their beliefs and practices and then to decide whether 'living the Kingdom of God' in the here and now was worth being denied the rights and privileges of membership of the secular society of their day. To their credit, they decided that it was and accordingly they kept the Society alive, often against strong odds.

A noticeable difference between the Society of Friends 150 years ago and today, is the lack of Birthright Friends and the number of Friends who have come to us as adults from membership of other churches. These new Friends are very welcome, but are sometimes not given as thorough a grounding in Quaker beliefs and practices as perhaps we might wish, so that, for example, secular business methods take the place of Quaker ones (Friends do *not* ask for a vote at Meetings for Business!).

Another difference between the Society of Friends then and now is that our Society is not as well known as it used to be. Many people either do not know of us, or see Friends as an American import, rather than a British export - and to one Registrar of Marriages, about 20 years ago it was "... a sect, something like the Moonies" ! Friends in the public eye are known for their accomplishments, but not for their membership of the Society, sometimes not even to other Friends. Do we have any Quaker MPs? If so, do they vote following their consciences, or following the Party Whip?

I can think of three films and one television docu-drama where at least one of the main characters is (or were) Friends. All three films are more or less Westerns made at least 40 years ago ('The Angel and the Badman', 'Friendly Persuasion' and 'Cheyenne Autumn'),

whilst the far more recent docu-drama about Arthur Eddington and his work mentioned that it was his pacifism which set him against WW1, but made very little of his beliefs, or his membership of the Society of Friends which had formed that pacifism.

Perhaps the oddest appearance of a Friend in fiction is in the pages of the late Georgette Heyer's Regency romp, 'The Foundling' (Pan Books, 1967), where an elderly Quaker gentleman and his unnamed sister make a brief appearance to rescue the 'foundling' of the title from one of her many scrapes. The sympathetic manner in which Mr Clitheroe's character is drawn suggests Ms Heyer's experience of Friends, whatever it may have been, must have been a positive one.

It is a pity, though, that amongst all the recent documentaries and television programming about WW1, no-one felt able to make a docu-dramas about, for example, the work of the Friends Ambulance Unit or the childrens' feeding programmes which led to the formation of the charity, Save the Children. Indeed, an equally recent film about William Wilberforce and the abolition of slavery in Britain, apparently hardly even mentioned the Society of Friends, even though we had been extremely active in the abolition movement, from its very first inception.

To 'live the Kingdom' requires a particular attitude of mind: There is no benefit in telling somebody who is homeless that God loves them – they would rather have a roof over their heads. The same goes for people who are starving – if God loves them, why has he sent the droughts (or floods) which have killed their crops? For a mother who has lost a son in Afganistan, what use is it to say that the young soldier is now in Heaven? - she would far rather that he had come home to his family.

Living in the Kingdom of God in this world means that we have an obligation to help those who are homeless, whether we do so by building low cost homes, or contributing to charities like Shelter or St Mungo's. Working to reduce global warming, or to support charities which reclaim desert lands will, in the long term, help those who have lost their livelihoods to floods and droughts. To help a mother who has lost her soldier son, all we can do is to be there for her, to help her cope, but not to negate her grief or pontificate on the follies of war.

There is, though, a serious dichotomy at the very basis of Friends' beliefs: The Society arose from Puritanism, in effect 17th century fundamentalist Christianity, but Fox himself was a mystic and there has been a strong thread of mysticism running through Friends beliefs ever since – although most Friends would see themselves as 'practical' Christians.

This difference between the mystic and the worldly highlights an incipient rift in the modern Society, that is, the difference between the 'Christocentric' and the 'Universalist' Friends. Sadly, the manner of words used by both groups often obscures the fact that they are **often** saying exactly the same things and, even more unfortunately, a small minority of Christocentric Friends have inherited the outlook of their Puritan forebears.

This is best exemplified by an incident which happened several years ago. A Christocentric Friend saw a picture of the Buddha on the notice board of a Meeting House and took it down, saying forcefully "Quakers are *Christians!*". The picture has not been seen since.

The Friend in question was almost certainly unaware that the picture had been blessed and given to a Universalist Friend from the same Meeting, by the Abbot of a Buddhist monastery, in thanks for donating money for the repair of that monastery. If Buddhist blessings have value, that Meeting is certainly not benefiting, yet the 'Advices & Queries' are quite clear that Friends should accept the Light from whatever direction it may come.

One of the most unkind stereotypes of the Society of Friends is that it is 'middle' – middle aged, middle class and middle-of-the-road. Young Friends and the number of elderly Friends show that the first stereotype is incorrect, but it is based on a statistical problem – With the disappearance of Birthright Friends, the Society has not, apparently, got any child (or young Teen) members. This skews our average age upwards by at least 10-15 years, even though our Young Friends are still extremely active

Are Friends 'middle class'? Some certainly are. Because of our Testimonies our membership tends towards the 'care' professions: nurses, doctors, teachers, social workers, etc. These professions, by the very fact that they require long periods of training, have historically been seen as 'middle class' (since the working class could not afford to keep their children in higher education).

With the emphasis on improving access to education to which every government since the 1960's has subscribed, this is no longer true. Friends do have 'working class' members in professional jobs, but we also have them working in service industries, staying home to look after children, or in desperate straits because they have just been made redundant.

'Middle-of -the-road' is probably the most true of the Quaker stereotypes. Friends are concerned with many good causes and work hard for their favourite charities and interest groups, but they are not usually extreme in their views. As we do not believe in fighting for our beliefs, but prefer reason and persuasion, we do not choose violence as our means of expression and perhaps that earns us a few laughs amongst those of differing opinions. We are liberal with a small 'l', but I would guess that as many Friends vote for the Conservative party as do for the Socialists or the Greens.

A stereotype which is unfortunately true is that, by and large, most of the Society is made up of 'white, Anglo-Saxon Protestants'. Population demographics mean that our Celtic Friends are in the minority and as for Friends with brown or black skins, they are extremely rare.

Some years ago, I was at a Business Meeting which was considering inviting members of other churches in the area to some social occasion. When it was suggested that we might invite a local black church, it was decided not to bother as 'they probably wouldn't want to come'. If we didn't invite them, how do we know that they wouldn't have been pleased by the invitation (even if they did not accept)? Thankfully, Interfaith initiatives are gradually breaking down these and similar barriers, but it is a woefully slow process.

Where does the Society of Friends stand today? Friends have all the advantages of Rowntree's generation but we are a declining Society. What has happened and how can we reverse the trend? Secular society bemoans the lack of discipline of young people, their violence and selfishness, whilst within our Society, Friends bemoan the low membership and the lack of Spirituality in our Meetings.

As far as the often-heard complaint about the lack of spirituality in our Meetings is concerned, it seems to me that there is a difference between the spirituality based upon

living the Kingdom as Fox would have perceived it and a kind of 'monastic' spirituality which is far more common, in which individual Friends concentrate on improving their relationship with God, whilst not paying much attention to the needs of all the people of this world.

Strangely enough, this is the time when we have a wonderful opportunity to revitalise the Society of Friends. We have realised that there are a number of problems, both inside and without the Society and there is a general willingness to do something about both sets of problems.

That is the negative: What about the positive? Why has the Society of Friends such an opportunity to revitalise itself at this point? It seems that everywhere one looks, someone is bemoaning the breakdown of society and one of the symptoms of that breakdown is the rise of extremism, be it religious fundamentalism, or right wing politics. What can the Society offer to stop, or even reverse, the trend towards breakdown?

One of the things which the Society of Friends can do, is to build and encourage a sense of community amongst our Local and Area Meetings. General Meetings have been laid down, in many cases because no-one has the time to organise or to attend them, but these, or similar Meetings are necessary for the fostering of relationships, both on a religious and on a secular level and the bi-annual residential Yearly Meeting is not enough to satisfy this need..

To attract new Members, we need to emphasise that the Society of Friends is not extremist, it is, indeed, a haven of tolerance. In a society which is lost for valid religious experience, it can offer us the time and space to encounter whatever we call God. Rather than demanding that we rigidly follow a set of outdated cultural rules of behaviour, it can offer us the ability to directly experience the presence of God.

We can even encounter the same sort of mystical experience which enlightened George Fox, by re-reading the Gospels as Jesus' call to build the Kingdom of God in the 'here and now', so that all of God's creation can benefit from all the good things which the Earth has to offer. Once we are able to rediscover our sense of community, we can stand firm against all divisive trends.

Rex Ambler's small book, "A Light to Live By" explains exactly how he rediscovered the technique which Fox probably used to encounter the 'living Christ'. Whether Fox did truly experience Jesus as a living person, or as simply an aspect of his own psyche, this book, or the 'Experiment with Light' seminars, can make it easy for any Friend to have the same experience, and so to discover for themselves what 'waiting on the Light' truly means. They will also understand why early Friends experienced such a massive influx of members from all walks of life.

We must emphasise that we cannot (and should not) offer certainty. What we can offer is space to deal with whatever problems bedevil us and also a philosophy of life which makes it easier to 'live the Kingdom' in a way in which we can engage the secular world, make a living for ourselves and our families, but at the same time have an ongoing religious experience which makes it imperative for us to have care for 'our neighbours', whosoever they might be.

There are, however, several more steps which Friends might consider taking: For us to be better known, we have to be visible. Unfortunately, Friends are in the habit of doing good unobtrusively. This is where Friends House might take the lead.

When something happens which offends the moral sense of most Friends (such as the present war in Afganistan), Friends House should prepare and publicise a statement from 'The Society of Friends in the UK', to go out to the radio, TV and newspapers. If the media choose not to publicise it, that it up to them, but Friends, as a group, will have stood up and made their feelings public

At the same time, when the Government (or some other public body) takes an action which most Friends will approve, such as the current work on reducing CO₂ emissions, Friends House might put out a similar statement, congratulating the body on its positive action.

King Charles II gave Friends the right to approach the monarch directly. In these days of a constitutional monarchy, this right is not of much real use, but has any Quaker MP or historian checked to find out whether that right is transferable from the monarch to the Prime Minister? If so, it might, once again, become extremely important. Imagine a

weighty Friend telephoning a Prime Minister with advice. It might be ignored, but at the same time, it might also offer an alternative point of view not previously considered.

Then there is the problem of contacting Friends: The Friends House website has improved markedly since its inception and much of Friends House communications are carried via the Internet, however, there are some Friends who do not have computers and so, are cut off from information they need to know.

For some Friends, the problem is financial. A computer may cost them the equivalent of two or three weeks' wages. When one is trying to live on a low budget, a computer is probably one of the last things to be considered an essential. Certainly, I have seen a goodly number of local school children using the Public Libraries' computers to do their homework – if they had Internet access at home, it is unlikely they would need to make the trip to the Libraries.

For other Friends, the problem is physiological. I know at least one Friend whose eyes are badly affected by (I assume, the light from) a computer screen, whilst others find the keyboards difficult to use. Then, of course, there are those Friends for whom the problem is psychological: Technophobes do not, by definition, have an easy time with any electrical gadget and in essence, a computer is simply such a gadget, which is marvellous when it works and a source of constant frustration when it doesn't.

There needs to be a telephone link system to back up e-mailed documents. Now that many mobile phones can handle text messaging, they are the ideal medium to become that back-up system. Friends House documents could be e-mailed to all those Friends with Internet addresses and then forwarded to text messaging on all the mobile phone numbers held by Friends House. If the computers have crashed, the messages still get through and a large majority of Friends without Internet access would simply receive the text message.

Is there such a thing as a Friends House blog? A 'thought for the day' could be recorded by well-known Friends, especially those in the entertainment industry, and the content could be a passage from 'Advices & Queries' or 'Faith & Practice', as well, perhaps, as short excerpts from the diaries of George Fox or John Woolman. At the same time, a very brief 'Friends House' video could be shot and placed on 'YouTube', the social networking

video site. It only need show a few pictures of Friends House, with a voice-over giving address and opening details. Friends do not need to proselytise, but we do need to publicise.

The 'Leaveners' have produced some remarkable work, but have they ever filmed and entered any of their dramas into the short-film competitions run by a number of TV stations? For that matter, has anyone ever approached the major terrestrial TV channels with a Quaker-themed programme?.

There are often local events where Friends could make their opinions felt. Local weekly newspapers often have a slot for religious comment and some invite contributions. If a Local Meeting nominated a Friend to write to the 'Opinions' page of the local paper when they felt it relevant and signed the letter not only with their name but also the name of their Meeting, and they also offered to write a religious comment for that paper, it is likely that the paper would add that person's name to their list of regular contributors. Friends in that area would then have their concerns publicised in their local paper(s) and would become known for their ethical stance..

Local Meetings are the places where the general public usually make their first acquaintance with Friends. Often it is because the Meeting House is rented out to other organisations (although, if there is a very regular tenant, the Meeting House might become known by the tenant's name, rather than Friends!) , but this gives Friends the chance to leave out Quaker leaflets, booklets and pictures on shelves and notice boards, to be picked up by interested visitors.

Many local Meetings also have a dedicated telephone link, either to the Clerk, or to a recording which gives out a contact number for any interested callers. This can also cause problems in that there are at least 3 telephone books in most areas (BT, Thompson and Yellow Pages) and the link number should appear in all of them – often quite an expensive option.

There are also the on-line directories, like Yell.com and Down My Street, which could carry location information about the nearest Friends Meeting House in any particular town,

however, again this is going to prove costly and perhaps it should be up to the Area Meeting to decide whether funds are available for such entries

Some Local Meetings are very well attended, some are not. Obviously, a Meeting in a large town will be better known and attended than one in a small village, but it is likely that all the Friends in the village will know one another and will know when someone is ill, out of work, having marital difficulties, etc: whilst the Meeting in the large town may have Friends who never see (or are in contact with) each other from one month's end to the next.

Meeting for Sufferings was originally convened to make lists of, and to assist, Friends who had been sanctioned in some way, usually for non-payment of tithes or non-attendance at Anglican services. Over time, it has changed function and now it is usually a Meeting's Overseers who will have a responsibility for Friends in need of some kind of help. Any Nominations Committee member will say that finding enough suitable Overseers is an incredibly difficult task, especially in a small Meeting and it is here that Friends and Attenders have to wrestle hard with their consciences: Do we give enough time to Meeting business? Are we available for Nominations Committees to consider our names?

There is a tradition in the Society that Friends do not volunteer for a particular post. It is thought that the Meeting's Nominations Committee will use their knowledge of Friends and Attenders to choose the correct person to hold a post. That is fine in a Meeting where everybody knows everyone else, but in a modern Meeting this is becoming a far rarer phenomenon.

We have to have some means by which Friends with useful skills can make them known to their Meeting. I would suggest that when Attenders first request membership, their visitors make a note of any skills they can offer and that some means is found to keep a list of such names and appropriate skills, which can easily be accessed by the Nominations Committee.

In some Meetings, Overseers are the last to know of a problem for which they could offer help. In some cases this is because the person concerned is reluctant to ask for help. In other cases it is simply because they do not know that help is available. One Meeting places photographs of their officers on the Notice Board, so that everybody can recognise

the Clerk, the Elders and the Overseers, etc, however, if the Overseers' ability to help out with all kinds of difficulty is not regularly publicised their ability to help is compromised.

One problem that early Friends' rejection of ceremonials caused, was that we have no set rights of passage. Birth, marriage and death are celebrated by Meetings for Worship, but we have nothing to equate with, for example, the ceremony of baptism, unless it is the application for Membership - and that leaves us with no tangible evidence (except a confidential note in the Area Meeting minutes). Perhaps we need a Ceremony of Welcome, one which could be adapted, as necessary, to suit the needs of small children encountering religion for the very first time, or for adults fleeing to us from a more judgmental denomination.

With regard to Membership, many new Friends come to us from other denominations, or even, from other religions. It is only natural that they keep a memory of their previous form of worship, but sometimes such forms can be wildly inappropriate. One way in which newer Friends and Attenders could be shown the Quaker way of doing business is that once it is apparent that an Attender is coming to Meeting regularly, they should be assigned a 'buddy', that is, a Friend who is well versed in our manner of doing business and has at least some of the same interests as the Attender. This would not only provide guidance, but also a friendly face in a sea of unknowns.

I would further suggest that today Friends desperately need a Teaching Ministry and that it would be extremely helpful if the system of Recorded Ministers was reintroduced. Such a Teaching Ministry, with a known system of Recorded Ministers, 'weighty Friends' well known for their volume of knowledge and ability to teach, should make it possible for Area Meetings to arrange for what used to be called 'First-Day School' (more colloquially 'Meeting before Meeting'), perhaps half an hour before or after Meeting for Worship, when the Quaker way of doing business, the way of holding meetings, the manner in which concerns are dealt with, what exactly *is* a 'concern', how the Society is structured - and many other interesting and informative subjects could be discussed, regularly and in a convivial manner.

It must be emphasised though, that any such 'Recorded Ministers' should not be chosen just because of their ability to talk, but because they have a deep and abiding love of God

and a strong belief in the aims of the Society of Friends. It almost goes without saying that they should have been members of the Society for a very long time, so that they have become well acquainted with the Friendly manner of doing business.

In today's social climate, it is often difficult for Friends to get to Meeting: there may be family calls on their time, they may have to work on Sundays or there may be difficulties with transport (not everyone owns a car and public transport generally decreases noticeably on a Sunday). Some Meetings have experimented successfully with mid-week Meetings for many years and Friends who cannot get to Meeting on a Sunday may find that a Wednesday afternoon, or a Tuesday evening, is a far better time.

Having two Meetings in the same week, may put a strain on the Clerk, but there is no reason why the Clerk should not facilitate one Meeting and the Assistant Clerk the other. If a Meeting does not have an Assistant Clerk, the Clerk could consult with Nominations Committee to find a Friend willing to act as convenor for a regular mid-week Meeting. In this way, Friends needing the spiritual nourishment and the support of like-minded people could be sure of being able to attend *a* Meeting, if not one on Sundays.

There are also other places where the Society of Friends offers education and support to its Members and Attenders. Woodbrooke, Charnley Manor and Claridge House come immediately to mind. 'Woodbrooke-on-the-Road' is a particularly useful asset, because it enables Friends who are unable to travel long distances (as well as those who are unable to afford the time, or the cost, of travelling to Woodbrooke for a course) to be able to participate in specially arranged 1-day events much nearer to home.

I would suggest that both Woodbrooke and Woodbrooke-on-the-Road offer regular 'Experiment with the Light' seminars. For some people, mysticism is a worrying phenomenon, but when it is properly understood it is a life-affirming form of spirituality which offers everyone the possibility of close encounters with God.

Many younger people who find the events of the world to be confusing as well as truly horrible, turn to New Age spirituality for support. This is not necessarily a bad thing, but it is, to my mind, rather a waste of time. Why become a Druid when the Society of Friends

already offers a philosophy which honours and tries to preserve the natural world? Why spend time studying Wicca, when one can already heal using the gifts of the Spirit?

A number of studies (true, mainly in the USA) have shown that prayer is efficacious in assisting a person's recovery after an illness or medical intervention and Fox's 'Book of Miracles' shows that this is something which has always been a part of Friends understanding of the world – that there is something 'other'. Something which can make us so much better than we think we can be, something which, if we let it, can become life changing, not only for us, but for all those with whom we come into contact – and we need to be telling the world at large about our discovery..

Britain today is a society in a state of flux and perhaps already in crisis. We have little faith in our elected representatives, there is a culture of greed, aggression and consumerism which frequently leads to crime, especially of the white-collar variety, there are areas in our big cities where living conditions are worse than in some Third World Countries and the differing qualities of life experienced by the 'haves' and the 'have-nots' are similar to those in the days of J. S. Rowntree.

Where does the Society of Friends fit in this picture? Can we change it in any way? For several hundred years Friends have been known for their willingness to take part in movements for change, be it the abolition of slavery or stopping nuclear warfare. Somehow, though, it seems as if Friends of late have become less vocal, less active.

For the future, Friends must be willing, not only to speak up for their beliefs, but to take action, even to become the catalyst for action and to do that, they need support. The support of their Local Meetings, their Area Meetings and, above all, the support of Friends House, which must be willing to speak out on behalf of all Friends in Britain.

My conclusion is that this is a time of great potential for the Society of Friends.. We need to publicise ourselves better, we need to correct several long-standing stereotypes (we do not dress as if we have just stepped off from a breakfast oats package!), but at the same time, we need to strengthen several others, most notably that we are a Religious Society, not a Friendly Society, that although we trace our roots back to fundamentalist

Christianity, we are not ourselves fundamentalist, nor credal, nor judgmental in any way, but that, when we see a wrong being done, we will take it upon ourselves to act to right it.

Also, and most importantly, we need to stress that we offer a place of peace, where it is still possible for anyone, if they so wish, to experience the sacred in their lives.
