

From VISION to DEEDS

An essay on the subject

“The Future of the Religious Society of Friends in Britain”

From VISION to DEEDS

“Where there is no vision the people perish” (Proverbs 29:18 King James version of the bible). I wonder if the concept behind this quotation applies to religious societies and, if so, whether the Religious Society of Friends has sufficient vision to survive into the future.

There is certainly no shortage of vision amongst Quakers. Whoever met a Quaker who didn't have a vision! But do all these visions amount to one great Quaker vision or are they all the personal inspirations of each individual Quaker?

And if there is one great Quaker vision how is it shared and how is it transmitted to attenders and enquirers? Oh dear! I'm already writing in a series of questions, just like “Advices and Queries”, but then that is part of the way that we share our vision. Another way is by having “crusades”. These crusades are usually the outcome of what Quakers call their “concerns”, but I shall call them “challenges”. At various times they have included religious freedom, abolition of slavery, prison reform and many others. So what are or should be the challenges which Quakers face today and will the way we approach them determine the future of the Religious Society of Friends in Britain over the coming decades?

Well I'm going to write about a few of the challenges I perceive, although mine may well not be the list that anyone else would choose. It may also strike the reader that my list is weighted towards problems that are seemingly internal to Quakers. They are however challenges that need to be addressed and how we tackle them will tell others a lot about our vision. I should add that I am certainly not clever enough to resolve these challenges. I would just like to encourage Friends to think of some of these issues and see them in the context of “The future of the Religious Society of Friends in Britain”.

I wonder what picture that phrase “the future of the Religious Society of Friends” brings to mind. At one extreme it could be triggering thoughts of an ever expanding Society doing more and more wonderful things. At the other extreme it could be questioning whether the Society has any future at all. If we didn't think the Society had something important to offer to the world we wouldn't be here to discuss the subject. The puzzle is why others cannot see it, why our efforts at outreach are not more successful, and why the number of committed worshippers in our meetings continues to decline.

There is of course lots of really good news about the Quakers most of which is encapsulated in the words “Take heed dear Friends to the promptings of love and truth in your hearts” and when I see or hear of fellow Quakers applying this “Advice” in their endeavours I feel very small but very proud to be a member. Quakers don't go looking for “promptings of love and truth”; the promptings just arrive when we see injustice or pain or need. And then there are our testimonies to truth, equality, simplicity and peace which are I suggest not in themselves promptings but give us a framework in which to discuss and understand our promptings. We might well question any prompting that contradicted one of our testimonies.

So are the testimonies the great Quaker vision (whatever that vision may be)? Well for me they are not the vision, they are the everyday practical rules that follow from our vision. They could equally follow from many other possible visions and therein lies a problem for the Society. So many people can be attracted to our meetings by the testimonies without giving their allegiance to

the Quaker vision that lies behind them. This might account for why so many attenders join us in a flurry of enthusiasm and then drift away after six months and others after a year or two.

I keep talking about the Quaker vision as if it was something that I or someone else had already defined. But my thesis is that the future of the Society is dependent on this vision which in some people's minds including mine has not been satisfactorily defined. I feel that it was well enough understood in past centuries, that it has developed or changed as the years have gone by, and that by the twenty first century it has become rather indistinct. Please for the moment just think of it as the top of a pyramid or mountain. The top may be hidden in the clouds but that doesn't stop us talking about it.

If you look in a dictionary you will find a long list of possible meanings for the word vision and you may well ask what I mean by the word in the context of this essay. Perhaps the only way to answer that is by surrounding it with a list of other words or phrases that share part of their meaning with the word vision but none of which replace it. The list might include core belief; inspiration; the central driving force; right ordering of the world in which we live; and recognition of the ultimate truth. But in the context of this essay it would be something that the whole Society understands, accepts and takes as the starting point for everything we believe and do.

I mentioned above the attenders who drift away. Happily there are many many attenders who do not drift away but stay year after year and contribute as much in time, energy and inspiration as do the members. I hope those attenders will forgive me if I say something about the importance of membership. I see membership as a formal statement of commitment, a commitment that should make it more difficult to break away if doubts arise. Membership should make the default option staying in rather than leaving. In this sense it should be rather like marriage. In each case you are declaring that you have considered as best you can what the commitment that you are taking on really means. In marriage you have considered the implications of "in sickness and in health" and/or of starting a family. In membership you have considered the implications of the Quaker vision. So if you are not clear what that Quaker vision is why would you want to become a member?

I think I am right in suggesting that the ratio of members to attenders is decreasing. That is an additional reason why there is an ever decreasing pool of members, people who have formally declared their commitment to the Society. If we want our clerks, treasurers and trustees to be members then those posts must be filled from a smaller pool and this places a greater burden on the members. Unless we can find ways of reducing that burden membership will become like a treadmill. The vision is pulling us forward, and the burden is holding us back. The burden can be partially eased by asking attenders to take on some of these roles, but as many meetings have found this is only delaying the inevitable burden which pushes people away from the Society.

Perhaps we now have to take a closer look at what that burden is. I expect many of you will agree that much of the burden relates in one way or another to our meeting houses. Many of our meeting houses represent important threads from our past, provide the setting which many find most conducive to worship in the present, and convey the image that many would like to carry into the future. Many of our meeting houses, however, are larger than we need for the weekly meeting for worship, are expensive to run, and take an enormous part of our energies in maintenance. They are sapping our strength as a Society. We spend too much time on access legislation, listed building status, fire regulations, health and safety legislation, insurance requirements, and I'm sure I have missed out quite a few other aspects. So should we get rid of

all the meeting houses do you think? No, certainly not. But surely we should not keep them all just as they are and thus accept the high cost in effort and money. At the moment we just don't seem able to find a balance where we retain our essential heritage without diverting our focus away from our spiritual development.

We should perhaps assume right from the start that we will end up owning fewer meeting houses and that the solution found will be different in different cases. Some meeting houses will be sold and replaced by purchasing smaller more easily maintained buildings. Some will be replaced by rented properties and some by hiring rooms as required. In some cases it may be possible to retain the building but share the use and burden with another organisation. And there will be some buildings that are so precious to us that a group of Quaker meetings will agree to share the burden of maintenance. There are likely to be as many opinions on the way forward as there are members of the Society, and finding the right solutions could stretch to the limit our decision making process. This may be the moment when we discover whether Quaker business methods really do work and whether Quakers really do find the will of God in gathered meetings.

So is this disruption worth it? Yes, for two reasons, I think! The first reason is because it is such a strain on many meetings to find the volunteers ready to devote their energies to nurturing the meeting house structure. The second reason is because it expresses the values of the society. If we spend a large proportion of our energy and money on our meeting houses then it suggests that property is excessively important to us. We need somewhere to worship; that's reasonable. Our meeting houses may be part of our outreach by renting them out to other local organisations, and that too is reasonable. But if the net effect of our meeting houses is to the detriment of our core values (whatever they may be) then we have got the balance wrong, and I for one would suggest that we have. By bringing the burden of our meeting houses under control Quakers will open the way to being a greater spiritual force, and give the lie to any suggestion that we care too much about property.

And before we get to what many will think of as fundamentals let's discuss the burden of administration such as accountancy and management. Like the buildings, administration seems to be sapping our energy. As indicated above we have great difficulty finding volunteers for treasurers, trustees, and clerks. So can we forget about administration and turn our attention to spiritual matters? I am afraid not. Administration has the texture of treacle, and just sticks to everything. We don't seem able to get rid of it. As fast as we try to apply our Quaker principle of simplicity another directive turns up, a five year plan, or a terms of reference working party, or a revision to the regulations. Are all these procedures in the best Quaker tradition or are we being turned into something that reflects someone else's vision? Well can we break the chains and be ourselves? Any attempt to do so will involve a lot of careful thought, but I believe we ought to try. May I suggest that the starting point could be to ask whether we are truly a charity and should be regulated by The Charities Commission. I wonder whether the law requires that we are a registered charity or whether there is an alternative. Or perhaps there are ways of meeting their requirements without incurring this level of bureaucracy. It seems to me we have landed in the present position by default and a key deterrent to doing anything about it is the benefit we gain from gift aid tax relief. And that seems serious because I wouldn't like anyone to think that money was being allowed to temper our vision.

As an example a question that has come up locally relates to the terms under which wardens look after our meeting houses and nurture our meetings. It was suggested that the value of the rent free warden's accommodation might in some cases be greater than could be justified by the duties asked of the warden. If that should prove to be the case, ought we to put a value on the

accommodation and a value on the hours worked and then expect a financial payment for the difference from the warden? I must say I feel uneasy about measuring the hours worked and turning a tradition of voluntary care into a formal financial transaction. The aspect that concerned me most was a suggestion that this might be necessary to meet the requirements of the Charities Commission. Clarification is currently being sought.

In most cases I accept that regulatory authorities, including the Charities Commission, have put a great deal of careful thought into their rules and are acting in the interests of the whole population. Nevertheless where the regulatory authorities are causing us to move away from traditional Quaker practices we need to question whether the changes are really consistent with our beliefs. If we decide that our actions are being seriously prejudiced by compliance with other peoples rules we should be prepared to change what we do so that the regulations no longer apply. We might even have to accept that we cannot be a registered charity (provided that that is a legal option).

So what have I said so far that affects the future of the Society? Firstly we have to reduce the burden of our meeting houses or they will undermine our shared spiritual journey and our practical contribution to the world about us. Secondly we have to find a simpler way of achieving our objectives, one that doesn't submerge us in bureaucracy. If we cannot carry on our activities in a simpler way perhaps we are choosing the wrong activities.

Now one area where regulations have placed new demands on us is in the area of safeguarding our children. The most clear cut requirement is for some members of our meeting to have Criminal Records Bureau checks. If that really does protect our children it is a small price to pay for their safety. It is, however, only one aspect of our concerns about children. For one thing some meetings worry that we have so few children that come to meeting regularly. When children do come to meeting are we providing a coherent and comprehensible picture of the Quaker approach? Do we expect those members who spend five days a week teaching children to come and teach another group of children on a Sunday? Does it matter if we do not cater for children and would it make any significant difference to the number of future Quakers? I admire the work that larger meetings put into children's classes but in some small meetings there are few children, they are of widely differing ages, and they come on an irregular basis. It is impossible to maintain a consistent teaching role and some of us feel unable to even try.

So why am I spending so much time talking about children? It is quite simply because children are the future of everything, even our Society. In fifty years time many of today's members will not be here. They can only be replaced by people who as of today are still children. If we don't have views about children our views of the future will be limited.

So watching from the sidelines I see much wider concerns about children than the future of the Society and I mean all children, particularly all children in Britain. The problems of street gangs are well understood; the solutions are not. The number of one parent families is well documented but how that affects the outcomes for the children of one parent families is open to many different opinions. The questions of absent fathers, parental access rights, discipline, and what you can do for or to children that fail to respond to current methods of control or punishment are unendingly discussed with little apparent progress. Fortunately many children are brought up successfully in loving caring homes, but for those that are not there are some really big question marks.

For a religious organisation there are really two aspects to consider. Firstly what sort of children's classes do we want? Secondly do we have a Quaker concern for all children, those

who do not come to Quaker meetings, those that are growing up in adverse circumstances, and those that are getting into trouble? With regard to the first it seems to me that we really are trying to do our best even if the outcome in small meetings can be uninspiring to say the least. With regard to the second I feel sure that whatever aspect I chose there would be some Quakers somewhere who were devoting their energies to improving the situation, but I have the feeling that our efforts don't come together as a coherent crusade.

In my lifetime I have seen dramatic changes to the world as experienced by children in our country. Much greater emphasis is placed on possessions, on ownership or access to computers, mobile phones, i-pods, and toys of every description. Much greater emphasis is placed on child security and much of this is based on greater surveillance over everything they do. Don't let the little dears out of your sight! And that's good because there are evil forces about, but at the same time it's bad because it takes away their freedom and independence. Fathers (provided the family is still united with two parents) often play a bigger part in being with the children than when I was a child, and that's good too. But if both parents have to go out to work (or there is only one parent in the family and she or he has to go out to work) then providing a comprehensive and loving parental presence in the home can be a real challenge.

At the heart of the way we treat children lies the commitment we all feel when starting a family. We cannot expect old heads on young shoulders and when we meet the love of our life it is all wonderfully exciting and as a result we may not fully think through the implications of the responsibility we are taking on. Have Quakers a clear message to spread on the meaning of marriage for the future of children and families, on the priorities within married life, and on the difference between love and sex? And how are we setting about spreading our insights on children, marriage, love and sex as a complete picture? In Britain a lot of energy has been spent on seeking equality for women, on the importance of personal fulfilment, and on the protection of those in same sex relationships from persecution. There now needs to be the same amount of energy put into finding the right balance in family life, the balance that will result in fewer children growing up unloved and unloving. The more families that start out on the right footing the fewer problems will have to be solved later on. I would like to see Quakers leading the way.

And what about all those other Quaker concerns? I recently spoke with my son in law, a Roman Catholic, who had been to the West Bank where he met with participants in the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI) and saw the work they were doing. He was just so impressed with the part Quakers were playing in that project. To live our faith must be the best way to ensure that the values we hold dear live on. Caring about the work rather than the survival of the Society is surely the best route to achieving that survival. It appears to me that in this and many other endeavours the driving force is truly altruistic and could honestly be said to be the promptings of love and truth. By contrast there are in life many organisations that are formed specifically to provide material or social benefit for their members. Quakers are not one of them and we should be cautious of any concerns that appear to provide what the supporters of the concern would wish for themselves.

So let's stick with the promptings of love and truth in your heart. Why should these be a reliable driving force? Is there some thread that joins them all together and prevents one person's promptings exactly cancelling out someone else's promptings? Well perhaps it's God that joins them all and perhaps our promptings are the result of seeking the will of God. Quakers seem to believe that there is only one true God. If other religions worship God then the implication is that it must be the same God that the Quakers worship even if they are seeing him from a different angle. The bible talks about God as if he is a person but I imagine that most Quakers see him not

as a person but as a force or a concept or as the embodiment of natural spiritual rules or perhaps the sum total of all the good that exists.

But some of our number are unhappy with all this God talk preferring to think in terms of something special in all of us. Those of us who are resigned to the God word would say “that of God” in everyone. There is good in everyone if only we can find it, and of course everyone is equal. Does that mean we all have an equal amount of “that of God” in us, or perhaps that sort of equality is not a numeric thing? If we are all equal should we give an equal weight to everyone’s opinion, or do we temper it with the age, experience and wisdom of each person? Is everyone entitled to an equal amount of wish fulfilment or is it dependent on the practicality of their wish list? Is everyone entitled to the same amount of our love or should that reflect their need? Or, more likely are we just saying that everyone is equally entitled to receive some of our concern and care and we should seek out the good in everyone. Perhaps that is just another way of saying “Love thy neighbour as thyself” and everyone is our neighbour.

What I am saying is that some of the cherished Quaker sayings are somewhat imprecise and that unless there is something drawing them all together the impact of them could wander all over the place like a wayward dog without a lead. My concept is that there has been something drawing them all together but that its influence is dying and leaving us in a very shaky vehicle.

Well let’s not beat about the bush. What I am saying is that the bible, or Jesus, or Christianity has through most of the last three hundred and fifty years tied all our ideas together to make a complete and growing belief system. If we are now disengaging from Christianity our Quaker ideas have to stand on their own. When I first came to a Quaker meeting the book of discipline was called Christian Faith and Practice. Now it is called Quaker Faith and Practice which I think has turned out to be symbolic of the direction in which we are moving. A quarter of a century later the Christian thing still hangs about, but we have become somewhat hesitant about saying that we are all definitely Christians underneath. “The Religious Society of Friends is rooted in Christianity and has always found inspiration in the life and teachings of Jesus” doesn’t quite match up to “There is one, even Christ Jesus, who can speak to thy condition” and we will be lucky if even that more cautious statement survives many decades. In days when the vast majority of people in Britain automatically claimed to be Christian, then to see your Society as a branch of Christianity gave you a pretty solid base, ideas to which you could cling and reference points to which you could refer back. It meant that no one questioned the existence of God although in more recent times we have spent an increasing effort on redefining him.

Christianity gave us an anchor. It even as the years rolled by gave us a touch of respectability. But most of all it gave a climate in which anything we said or claimed or thought would be interpreted. When we enthused about diversity and being “open to new light, from whatever source it may come” we didn’t for one moment think that we doubted our on-going role as part of the wider Christian church. And in dipping into Advices and Queries once more there are plenty of words to reassure the reader that nothing has changed. But when we have an open day and people ask me what Quakers believe I find it no longer feels quite so secure. People from other churches ask “Are you Christians?” and I start wondering how many who attend Quaker meetings on a Sunday morning would be happy for me to say yes and how many qualifications I should put in to avoid being dissected by quotations from the bible.

At least many meetings have bibles scattered around the room on a Sunday morning. However, I doubt that many of us read them with anything like regularity or could quote from them with any confidence. I for one avoid bible study although I do use the bible as a reference book, but then I

come from an age when children studied the bible at school. We called it R.E., religious education, and that meant to us the bible. Talking to a twelve year old recently he said his school did R.P., religion and philosophy. Many of the others I believe study comparative religions. The significance of that, good though it may seem in a multicultural community, is that Christianity has become just one of a number of religions. It must all become very dispassionate, and often be about trying to remember the differences between one religion and another. At its best this may make for understanding between the different ethnic groups, but it does not seek your commitment to, or judgement of, any individual set of beliefs. Jesus taught just one set of ideas, all the ideas reinforcing each other. There was no confusion about which beliefs he was promoting, and you knew he was seeking your personal commitment to those beliefs.

We should therefore not rely on members of younger generations who find themselves in our meeting to be committed to the Christian message. They might be if they have been going regularly to another church, but there is a decreasing chance that they have because attendances at most churches have declined significantly over the last half century.

The Church of England, the Roman Catholics, and the non-conformists all see it as part of their task to teach the younger generation about their brand of Christianity. Their services too have a significant element of teaching the congregation by use of hymns, readings, and very importantly the sermons. The Quakers would also like to teach the basics of our faith but many meetings are too small to have effective children's classes, and don't have hymns, or sermons in their Meeting for Worship. At least we do each month in our Meeting for Worship read from Advices and Queries, and we do encourage members and attenders to read books, pamphlets and magazines but most of what we teach or publicise is about the things we think make Quakers stand out from other Christian churches. Very little of what we transmit teaches the fundamentals of Christianity. In the past we have relied on others to do that, but in the future we would be unwise to assume that people coming into our meetings know much about the bible.

So is the Quaker vision about Christianity, or about the teachings of Jesus, or is it about a deeper, better or more practical approach to Christianity? Or is it something that stands up in its own right without reference to Christianity? Perhaps most of you already know the answer; and perhaps if I had read more widely or thought more deeply or had had more inspiration I too would know. In fact I'm a pretty average sort of chap, or so I hope, so please bear with me while I try to work it out. For if Quakerism cannot be adequately comprehended by an average sort of chap it probably has a rather limited future – even if it has already lasted more than three hundred and fifty years!

I believe that the driving force of early Quakers was disillusionment with the behaviour of the established Christian church in the seventeenth century, allied to a belief that each one of us could experience direct contact with God, and that therefore we did not need priests to stand between us and God. I have difficulty in thinking of this as a complete stand-alone vision. That Quaker driving force can only be complete when added to some understanding of, or picture of, or feel for, who or what God might be. Quakerism is the way we reach out to God, but it is God that guides us, gives us meaning and hopefully changes our lives. If different religions have different Gods then a Quaker approach could be used by any religion to reach their God. We could all sit in meeting for worship and each of us reach out to our own God, and the only thing we would have in common would be the technique for reaching out. I doubt whether that is how many people see our meetings for worship. In fact I think that Quakers sitting in meeting for worship mostly believe they are reaching out to the one true God and wish the act of worship to become a united activity involving everyone in the meeting, something that could truly be called

a gathered meeting. We may have difficulty in describing God but most of the people in meeting believe that there is only one. And in many meetings most of the people will, if challenged, start relating God in some way to part, or all, of the Christian message.

And if I were challenged as to what my vision is I would probably say that it was based on Jesus' statement in the bible (King James version) Matthew 22 verses 37 to 39 :-

“Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.”

I must admit straight away that I make no claim as to the extent to which I follow these commandments and that I interpret the words in my own way, a way that can change as I feel I receive new insight. Today I might describe God as the ultimate truth. Nor am I suggesting that I know what is or should be the Quaker vision. It is more by way of illustration to show how a vision can be used to develop the pyramid downwards to the way we live our lives and the actions we try to take. Thus the first commandment above would seem to justify (amongst many other things) a green agenda – how could you love God if you are contributing to the destruction of his creation. The second commandment would similarly seem to justify non-violence. However, to use this “vision” to justify the need to keep all our meeting houses or to register as a charity might have to be rather convoluted to say the least!

Now let's see if I can pull these threads together. Let me describe them as the three challenges.

Firstly, can we identify and acknowledge the Quaker vision.

The Quaker vision was for centuries firmly based on the Christian message and we developed our own practices and interpretations because we were so appalled at the behaviour of some of the established churches. Those churches have changed, we have changed, and the people we might look to carry on the Quaker tradition have changed. This suggests we need to take another look at the Quaker vision.

Identifying the Quaker vision will be no easy matter. We must all be cautious of pressing for our own personal vision to be adopted by the Society. Maybe our shared vision cannot be encapsulated in a short set of crisp words but must shine through in our writings, in our deeds and in the stillness of our meetings. We should seek clarity and be wary of ambiguity.

Secondly, can we relate everything we do back to the Quaker vision.

The Quakers are involved in or leading many totally altruistic endeavours which illustrate Quaker concerns for the dispossessed and the down trodden, and for the well being of the world and nature. This is cause for great rejoicing. However they will only be truly Quaker endeavours if we have a Quaker vision by which to interpret them. For example any hint of self interest in a Quaker concern should cause us to review its validity.

We also need to question whether we spend too much of our energies on activities that cannot be clearly linked back to the Quaker vision. For example I believe that the energy expended on maintaining our meeting houses and administering our systems needs to be reduced and some heart searching and some difficult decisions will be required to find the right balance.

Thirdly, can we teach the Quaker faith to, and share the Quaker vision with, newcomers, children, and non-Quakers in a world of conflicting and uncertain religious values.

We have in the past relied on schools and other churches to teach the Christian message. Schools have dramatically changed their approach to religious teaching and there are fewer people attending churches. If our vision is basically a Christian one does that mean that we now have to teach the basics of Christianity? If our vision is no longer essentially a Christian one is there something else we will need to teach to convey our religious convictions?

Or do we have no religious beliefs that need to be shared with others?

The future of the Religious Society of Friends in Britain (and probably elsewhere) depends on how we tackle these challenges, and they all ultimately depend on what we decide the Quaker vision is.

I can already imagine some who might read this, saying "What is the fellow on about. We understand the Quaker vision, there's no problem or mystery, it's been around for three hundred and sixty years, its fully documented in Advices and Queries and in Quaker Faith and Practice, and what we have to do is spread it around to everyone else."

If that is how we all feel then we could do worse than adopt as the centre of our vision the sentence at the start of our second Advice "Bring the whole of your life under the ordering of the spirit of Christ." We might then feel that, having accepted this sentence as central to everything in the faith of Quakers, it might lead us to the promptings of love and truth in our hearts, and to acceptance of the testimonies. However, I have a nagging feeling that some Quakers will argue that using the word Christ implies that Jesus is the son of God, and that in all honesty Quakers haven't agreed that he is, nor have we decided exactly who God is. In fact there may be some who will say that nowadays Quakers are not Christians and that there probably is no God as described in the bible.

The question to me is whether we have the unity of belief to answer the three challenges listed above. Quakers love the word diversity. If by diversity we mean that people come to Quakerism from many diverse backgrounds and bring many diverse gifts then that is truly a cause for celebration. But if diversity means that when people have joined our worshipping community they continue to have many different and often conflicting views of what Quakerism is or ought to be about then this diversity will present an immense mountain to climb in rediscovering our vision. If as a result we do nothing about these challenges then I think our Society will wither away. If we face up to the challenges then we can become a stronger, more united Society, well able to continue to serve the world with our own brand of caring.

The only thing of real value we have to pass on to future generations is our vision, so we had better be clear what that vision is.

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