

## The Future of the Religious Society of Friends in Britain

It seems to me that whilst Liberal Quakerism fits in with the views of many who worship amongst Friends in Britain today, it is widely misunderstood. It is not understood by those who might and should be in our midst. It paradoxically is too narrow in that it appears to discourage certainty. Furthermore it fails to pass on its meaning and purpose. There is too much stress on seeking and individualism, with the result that too many lack the discipline and tools to benefit fully from the tradition. Even long time members have not prepared or developed their minds and hearts as they should. Too many have never joined in discussion groups or gone on courses, or read very much material of a spiritual nature. If they are asked what Quakerism is they flannel. Britain Yearly Meeting, in spite of all our wonderful efforts, is appealing to fewer and fewer individuals. The population, at large is increasing, people are thirsting for meaning to their lives and yet our numbers are falling. Other churches are facing the same problem but not all. The Evangelical churches are growing, this includes Quaker Evangelical churches abroad.

It is probable that we only have around 6,000 active members in this whole country who are prepared to commit themselves to membership and take office, go to Yearly Meeting and read *The Book of Discipline(1)* from cover to cover. These same few are mostly over fifty years in age and are Single Quakers in the Family and usually wear more than one Quaker hat at a time. They often serve for more consecutive trienniums than is good for them or us. Many of these do go on courses and prepare themselves to serve. They listen to each other and are concerned. More than ever before the running and management is being undertaken by paid individuals. Many of these people are chosen for their expertise and qualifications in particular fields rather than that they are practising Quakers. The guidance of '*the spirit in the midst*' is increasingly left out of the picture. In fact the word 'Religious' may well be omitted from our next Book of Discipline, as the word 'Christian' was from the front of the present volume. Members and Attenders have resigned or melted away from regular worship with us. If our membership is around 16,000, which I doubt, two thirds of us have not understood the principle of *the Priesthood of all believers*. Our leaders, Elders and Overseers have failed to discipline the flock.

*When early Friends affirmed the priesthood of all believers it was seen as an abolition of the clergy; in fact it is an abolition of the laity. All members are part of the clergy and have the clergy's responsibility for the maintenance of the meeting as a community. This means helping to contribute, in whatever ways are most suitable, to the maintenance of an atmosphere in which spiritual growth and exploration are possible for all... ..membership does not require great moral or spiritual achievement, but it does require a sincerity of purpose and a commitment to Quaker values and practices. QF& P 11.1*

I may be sounding rather gloomy about our beloved Society of Friends when, in fact, I think that we are doing rather well in such a world as we have. The power of the media and the materialistic pressure that we all struggle with, in our daily lives, are a sharp contrast to the Quaker heartland of simplicity, integrity and humility. I thought that The Gathering in York this year was a hopeful reflection of where we are. We are living in contemporary society and dealing with that, in our ability to change and yet still to hold true to our faith and tradition. However there are things that we need to do for the good of the whole.

I shall briefly give my version of the historical run up to the present situation and then attempt to suggest a way out of the dilemma. This is the dilemma of being so open and liberal that we could stray too far into humanism and therefore would no longer be in a position to call ourselves *the Society of Friends*. We would no longer be true to our inherited Biblical tradition. The word, Friends, or Friends of Truth or Friends in the Truth, was in use from the beginning and most Quaker historians refer to the text in the first letter of Paul to the Thessalonians, ch.1.4, where he writes.... *My dear friends, beloved of God...* (2) Further there would not be a Meeting for Worship with a Spirit in our midst and a corporate sense of enfolded unity. We would find it difficult to hold Meetings for Business in the guided Quaker way. These are held with the guidance from God.

George Fox, helped by many others, laid down the foundation and he came to that place of Truth, from a dark time in his life. One day he saw the light and knew *that Christ has come to teach his people himself by his power and spirit in their hearts.* (3)

As He writes in his Journal:

*And when all my hopes in them and all men were gone, so that I had nothing outwardly to help me, nor could tell what to do, then, Oh then, I heard a voice which said, 'There is one even Christ Jesus, that can answer thy condition', and when I heard it my heart did leap for joy.* (4)

These two books about the early Quaker movement, The Journal of George Fox and the Valiant Sixty, are full of the certainty of the early Quaker evangelistic period. We need it again today.

We are living in different times from those of 1859 when John Stephenson Rowntree wrote his essay. Then there was hope that scientific endeavour and technological invention would open up new horizons for humankind. Better housing and health care for all would give everyone, regardless of income, an even chance of improving their quality of life. There was certainty that universal free education would change the lives of everyone for the better. Also there was a push for real democracy and an urge to introduce a vote for every male adult and later for every adult female too. Gradually, through pressure, protest and the needs of the times, Parliament passed the necessary Acts. The way was paved for a brighter future for all or so the reformers thought.

In the mid nineteenth century the number of Quakers in Britain fell to an all time low, thirteen thousand. (1861 13,859) This had been happening for various reasons and,

yes, the disownment of Quakers for marrying out and so on was a cause, but there had been a drift towards Baptists and Methodists in certain areas since the eighteenth century. I believe that Meetings were too closed and did not easily welcome 'outsiders' into their midst. Quakers were indeed seen as 'peculiar people, and were rather different in dress and custom.

In the two lengthy pieces of research that I have undertaken, (5) I have discovered that oversight was poor, especially since about 1750. Struggling meetings were not supported in sensible or practical ways. Meetings that were in rural areas were visited rarely and often only one family kept them going. Worshipers were found to hold silent meetings which were often lifeless so far as spiritual development went.

In the nineteenth century there were the divisions here also that afflicted North American Quakers. Some thought that the Quietist Period of the eighteenth century was the cause of our diminishing numbers. That we needed to actually teach and read the Bible and share the message vocally as The 'Valiant Sixty' had shared the message that Christ had come to teach the people himself. Such Meetings set up Adult Schools to teach literacy and better skills for life. They had Bands of Hope that preached and held Meetings with hymn singing and some silent worship. It was a form of evangelising! Other individuals and Meetings carried on much as before. They were perhaps too small, old or lazy to think about what their position or stance was. Obviously a few brilliant individuals were aware of the need for change and were in touch with, and influenced by the happenings and findings in the wider society.

London Yearly Meeting, with one or two exceptions, remained as one, and, by a sort of osmosis, became part of the Liberal Tradition. This as we know was the outcome of the Manchester Conference and influenced by such people as William Charles Braithwaite, George Cadbury, John Wilhelm Rowntree, Rufus Jones and others. The Yearly, Quarterly, and Monthly Meetings stood the test of time and discipline, through that process, ensured that the Society of Friends continued. Hymns and Bands of Hope, Evangelism and Peculiar Habits fell by the wayside.

The mystic emphasis led by such people as Rufus Jones enriched and deepened our silent worship and our prayer life, and was more purposeful and worthwhile. In more recent years those wishing to improve their spiritual life have felt very comfortable learning from other traditions that also have mystical experience to share.

*Very often in these meetings for worship, which held usually for two hours, there were long periods of silence, for we never had singing to fill the gaps. I do not think anybody ever told me what the silence was for. It does not seem necessary to explain Quaker silence to children. They feel what it means. They do not know how to use very long periods of hush, but there is something in, short, living, throbbing times of silence which finds the child's submerged life and stirs it to nobler living and holier aspiration. I doubt if there is any method of worship which works with a subtler power or which brings into operation in the interior life a more effective moral and spiritual culture. Sometimes a real spiritual wave*

*would sweep over the meeting in those silent hushes, which made me feel very solemn and which carried me- careless boy though I was- down into something which was deeper than my own thoughts, and gave me a momentary sense of that spirit who has been the life and light of men of all ages and in all lands. Nobody had ever heard of the word "mystical," and no one would have known what it meant if it had been applied to this form of worship, but in the best sense of the word this was a mystical religion, and all unconsciously I was being prepared to appreciate and at a later time to interpret the experience and the life of the mystics.*

(6)

The Yearly Meeting continued to hold meetings in the silent tradition, with the idea of *the priesthood of all believers*. Any suggestion of a paid pastor or paid anyone was anathema to most. Perhaps we did lean towards a mystical tradition and rather neglected biblical study and understanding. Numbers rose, but not that much, when considering the rise in the general population and the influences of scepticism towards traditional theology that was around.

The impact of Socialism on many Quakers, as the twentieth century unfolded, has to be taken into account. The Labour Party grew in strength and seemed to echo the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount very nicely for many Friends. They perceived it to be a party that wanted many of the things Quakers wanted too. However the result of these leanings to the left, especially through the twentieth century and beyond, have meant that the Society has appeared unfriendly and even downright aggressive to anyone who has money, and money- making itself. These days few in meetings would dare to say that they were Conservative or came from a wealthy family and few do. Our membership tends to be made up of members who work in the Caring - Services, such as nursing, teaching and Social Work. There is no longer such a broad-based membership as there was. There are few doctors, lawyers, farmers, business people, scientists, or theologians, bankers or philosophers in our midst today. That independent composition of the past is no longer the strength that we have. The yeoman farmers, the shopkeepers and related family run businesses that were so much a part of an earlier day are not there. It is possible that a fairly high percentage of members and Attenders are employed by the government now. This has implications that are both complex and difficult to discern. One result is that some of our Testimonies can, unless we are careful, become politicised rather than be lived out spiritually. I am thinking of our Peace Testimony and our Testimony to Equality, for example.

The two World Wars affected London Yearly Meeting Friends. They were strengthened in their understanding of the need for the Peace Testimony and they found a role for themselves throughout with Conscientious Objection, Relief Work and a certainty that even more effort was needed in building a fair and peaceful society. In 1947 the Nobel Peace Prize was offered jointly to The American Friends Service Committee and the Friends Service Council. There was a lot of effort and support for the setting up of and running of The United Nations.

Everyone that lived through those war years, be they Quaker or Non-Quaker, was changed by the experience. Britain was changed and the nature of the Society of

Friends and the wider society had changed too. Many people could see for themselves the awfulness of war and the suffering and pointlessness of Hiroshima and the concentration camps of Europe and the Far East and they came to The Society of Friends which supported their Pacifism. People from all walks of life felt that everyone should be given a chance to use their gifts and have a decent life.

The Action side of the Quakerism was uppermost and the Spiritual side was kept going because the Meetings still had enough members from old Quaker families to keep things in right ordering. Many families were able to free one of their number to attend Business Meetings, even on weekdays, and many women were available to serve their meetings as they did not go out to work. There were few paid staff at Friends House.

In the 1930's the present Friends House came into existence and continues to be a blessing and a bind. I hope the newly opened Quaker Centre breathes new life into the place. We should take care that the effort involved in running such a central institution is worthwhile. The whole complexity of financing both the structure itself and the work it does, with charitable businesses and lettings and earmarked money, is running close to the wind, so far as the Quaker principles of simplicity and purity are concerned. Nothing is more important than the local meeting in the Society of Friends.

Some, even then felt the building and its purposes were questionable. Omerod Greenwood was scathing about its portals crowned with the symbolism of ancient Rome :

*So the symbol retained its power; but if architecture is to have a language at all, its use in Friends House argued an extraordinary illiteracy, shared by the Royal Institute of British Architects, their prize winning architect, his clients and the public. It is harder to think of a better example of blind tradition, preventing everyone from asking the key question: what should a Meeting-House be like? If the architect himself a Quaker, had read the symbol; or any of his clients on the committee had had the courage to ask, "What is this funny thing over the door?"*

*Would our portals ever have been crowned with the lictor's rods? But in the Roman world everyone could read the sign: ' Roman justice and power rule here '. Page 24 (7)*

I wish we had a headquarters that was not so difficult to manage and has only recently cost us too much. It still needs a lot more updating and cleaning. I hope we don't have to borrow a lot of money, once more to do this. It is in London but that should not be the reason for having our Quaker headquarters there should it? Britain Yearly Meeting stretches over the whole country and London is not geographically central. It is a costly business paying staff at London rates and I do not think we can afford to do this indefinitely. I am fed up with appeals to bail us out due, in part, to a failure to cut our cloth according to our coat. All the wonderful service that is given at Friends House could be done elsewhere, surely. I do feel concerned that we do not

attract more professional and worldly people to the Society because, as Omerod Greenwood hinted, we do seem to be illiterate in too many fields. This is very much the case in the Area Meetings that are now Charities with Trustees. I hope it is not the blind leading the blind. Anyway where is God in all of this?

What a contrast to the beautiful Meeting Houses around the country, some old, some new where they are suitable to our needs:

*On one never- to –be- forgotten Sunday morning, I found myself one of a small company of silent worshippers who were content to sit down together without words, that each one might feel after and draw near to the Divine presence, unhindered at least, if not helped, by any human utterance. Utterance I knew was free, should the words be given; and, before the meeting was over, a sentence or two were uttered in great simplicity by an old and apparently untaught man, rising in his place amongst the rest of us..... QFP 2.02 Caroline Stephen ( 8)*

The numbers in LYM did not increase until after the Second World War. Newcomers were interested in various aspects of Quakerism. Some wanted the active Christianity that the Society of Friends offered in The Peace Testimony for example, others the liberal attitude to ways of looking at religion and the strong universalism that many Quakers had. The social concerns which the Quakers supported appealed to many. Most left other Christian churches where they were no longer comfortable with the ritual, the creeds, and the church hierarchy. Certainly the Silent Mystical Tradition was important to these newcomers. Many, though, liked to develop their own personal belief system. The *presence in the midst* and other basic Quaker theology was not of interest to quite a few new members and the Christian/Biblical early Quaker background was too hurtful a reminder of what had been the cause of their search for a new Spiritual home. They were not ready to see the material in a new way. The baby was thrown out with the bath water. Don't teach the Bible to my child. Don't read the Bible in Meeting. This I think is why we have such ignorance within Quaker meetings of the main pillars of Quaker faith and practice. Sometimes we are quick to criticise other traditions whilst our own is getting more shattered and hollow by the day. This is serious and we have to be kind but firm about it. We have to accept that we will not be able to satisfy everybody all of the time.

Probably this is the most important thing I want to say. We have to stand up for our particular tradition. Just because we are open and liberal does not mean that we have no boundaries beyond which we cannot go. We do have a history which is as intertwined with our daily practices as are the threads of a piece of material. If you start tweaking here and there the piece will disintegrate and get lost and strewn about. It will not exist. Actually I am quite certain that this will not happen for the way is too precious. We are needed and our strong traditions are needed. We cannot be complacent about the matter though

I found *A Framework for Action 2009 -2014* a bit disappointing because it starts off by saying it wants to *strengthen spiritual roots* and then goes on to cover all the areas that are centres of interest in Friends House as if they are of equal importance. They

cannot be run aright, though, if they are not firmly within the Quaker tradition and that has to pin all together.

These days, as an individual Quaker you can wander here and there, you can wander into another tradition for a few years and then wander back into Quakers again. You can belong to two or three traditions at the same time. You can apply for membership and then resign and then, as your views develop and experiences move you, can re-apply. I am not suggesting this is a good or bad thing to do but it is happening. This is all very well for the individuals concerned, but it is a mixed blessing for the Quaker meetings involved. It is a good thing that there is, a bedrock of stalwarts, to keep things going all the time. There are many meetings now that do not have many 'grounded' Quakers left. Most, who have belonged to Quakers all their lives, of course, need to re-examine their theology and their spiritual life from time to time, as I suggest elsewhere. All this requires a strong and firm bedrock of Quaker rootedness, which we have lost in certain ways.

Here are two pleas for tolerance towards the old Quaker order and towards a Christian basis which were voiced around the tercentenary in 1952. These passages could still go down well at that time in most Quaker gatherings. Though by the seventies social change was hitting the country and the Quakers with considerable force. Relativism was in full swing.

Elfrida Vipont Foulds addressed a gathering of Quakers in Lancaster Town Hall on August 15<sup>th</sup> 1952 :

*So be faithful and live in that which thinketh not the time long', {George Fox} For in this century of Quakerism that is opening before us we are called to be like George Fox 'stiff as a tree and pure as a bell ', to be like Margaret Fell, 'like one of our north country yellow lilies pushing up through the snow to tell us Spring is here ' like Edward Burrough 'our strength must be bended after God.*

And Maurice Creasy, one time Director of Woodbrooke, wrote his pamphlet :

*It seems to me that, when all is said and done, there really are, as Jesus told us long ago, only two ways through life, the Broad and the Narrow. The former the way of self assertion, domination, self-centredness, appetite- leads, as it has ever led, to destruction, disintegration, alienation. The latter-the way of self-spending, of compassionate service, of concern for others-leads us, as it has ever led, to 'life', to wholeness, to authentic existence.(9)*

The appeal of Elfreda will seem peculiar to many Members and Attenders in our meetings today. Many of these people have come from backgrounds where there is little or no Christian teaching. They do not know the Bible very well and even have negative feelings about it, about the idea of God, Jesus, Church, Religion. Maurice Creasy's booklet with its basis on biblical teachings will seem like gibberish.

Many in our midst today have experience of spiritual ritual and a belief that has been gleaned from Green movements, where smatterings of many world traditions have been handed on. The current concerns about the environmental situation for our planet have also led to movements which link themselves with prehistoric Mother Earth rituals and experiences. The disgust with the greedy modern world, with money, materialism and war, has led to an unearthing of interest in native cultures and their ritual. Others have experience of other world traditions and bring that with them into Quakerism. As a result quite a few of our meetings are composed of more newcomers with no Christian or Quaker background than with long standing Quakers. These same Quakers also may not have a Christian background either. They are all Seekers but submit to the Quaker teaching very lightly. In a lot of meetings it is quite difficult, and wearisome to maintain Quaker discipline.

Having found Quakers and joyously embraced the silent tradition as a form of meditation, not a few meld their previous spiritual experience into their Quaker life. They sometimes are not interested in serving on committees in support of local and central work but glad it is happening on their behalf. They do not want to actually become clerks and learn how Quakers ran their society. So the pool of those who know how to run things in the Quaker way gets smaller and smaller. Fewer and fewer observed and experienced how to Clerk a business meeting and keep the minutes in a Quaker way.

I cannot go into the implications of the internet, which is here to stay. It needs care to ensure that it is the servant of the Society of Friends and that, whilst all participate, it uses grounded Quakers in major discernment. It should not take the place of the gathered meetings held in traditional ways. It can too easily put too much power into the hands of a few and into the hands of ill- informed individuals.

Most Meetings have people on their lists that never come to Meeting anymore. Though illness and old age account for some of this drifting it is not the only reason that Members and Attenders stay away, there is also dissolution with the way the Society of Friends is going. There are also many Seekers who come to our meetings for a time and then go. Too often no one bothers or has time to visit them and find out why. They go mainly because they cannot find the welcome they expected and hoped for, or they cannot find out what we believe. They go because they think we are not able to cater for their children, or help them with their personal problems. They also go because they cannot handle the silence and the form. None of these figures appear on our tabulation. In fact our tabulation figures are possibly rather inaccurate. Possibly we should have a system that helps us to look more deeply at our membership trends and which discerns why numbers are rising and falling in different areas.

So here we are today with perhaps a much wider composition of spiritual experiences from all over the world than we had in 1859, but at the same time with not such a broad social makeup. Some are quite happy to call themselves Post –Christian and some feel also that the days of God are over. Some influenced by the Sea of Faith movement are happy to accept that there is no rationally ordered scheme of things, no supernatural order, no God or Goddess, no Saviour. Use of the Bible is seen as decadent and unhelpful. They join in with Quaker Meeting and feel that silent



waiting is the human discipline they need for wholeness and guidance in their purely human life.

There are also quite a large proportion of Quakers, in most meetings, that have a belief system that includes some picture of the other, or the spiritual dimension of the human condition. They do rely on the Quaker inheritance though the range of that picture is wide. Some are quite Jesus centred and others are more mystic and fluid in their worship. Some feel comfortable with Isaac Pennington's advice :

*The end of words is to bring men to the knowledge of things beyond what words can utter. So learn of the Lord to make a right use of the Scriptures: which is by esteeming them in their right place and prizing that above them which is above them. QF& P 27.27 and a lot more in QF& P and (10)*

As Mirium Warre said at the World Gathering at Chavakali 1991, the British Friends are Wishy –Washy. Anything goes and you pick and choose as if in a super market. This is a bit of an over statement , but too often I have heard Friends take bits of the well known Quaker phrases, passed down through the ages and revered, and use them to suit their own purposes. One of the worst cases is the Balby quote inserted in the Book of Discipline :

*Dearly Beloved Friends, these things we do not lay upon you as a rule or form to walk by, but that all, with the measure of light which is pure and holy, may be guided; and so in the light walking and abiding, these may be fulfilled in the Spirit, not from the letter, for the letter killeth, but the Spirit giveth life. QF&P 1.01 Introduction*

This is certainly part of our stance against Creedal statements and enables each of us to come to the wisdom in our own way, but, at the same time, it is also strongly advising us to partake of the material which follows and endeavour to make it our own. If we do, it is clear that Quakers in Britain Yearly Meeting still have a Christian thread. At heart it is not a humanitarian organisation :

*There are two groups of British Quakers who can hurt other Friends badly by their ministry, and both groups are then hurt themselves by the response of others. I have heard ministry from those of us who have gone beyond Christian language and concepts, and who cheerfully leap beyond theism and God –language; these Quakers sometimes speak as if other Friends are immature and will one day grow out of their childish dependence on old –fashioned imagery. On the other hand, I have heard ministry from those of us who have a close and precious relationship with Jesus, God and the Spirit; these Quakers sometimes speak as if everyone*

*else simply has to turn to the Christian God to be flooded with the experience of God's love. Friends speak in bewilderment hurt –or fury- of being eldred for both these sorts of ministry, and we probably all know of meeting communities which have been deeply divided by reactions to it: (11)*

The relativism of the wider society has seeped into our meetings and we do not guide each other along tried and tested routes. This is releasing in one way because it should and does enrich our Quaker life, but for those who need more help along the way it is seriously lacking. They are left in no man's land. They do not know how to discipline themselves or how to come to meeting with heart and mind prepared. They do not understand what the *Priesthood of all Believers* is and what it entails. They often are annoyed with Ministry in Meeting. Indeed some meetings are getting 'dry' to use a description often found in Quaker Journals of C18th and C19ths.

The renewed relationship between Quaker Life and Woodbrooke is a most promising development. There is authority in it and yet a freedom within the discipline. As we do not have paid clergy it is incumbent upon Elders and Overseers to steer worshippers to a place of assurance and certainty. I wish we had more localised centres of excellence where doubters and misinformed could gain strength and love and power. Sometimes this might well take the place of a Meeting for Worship. Those who want the silent gathering can meet at another time or place. We need to be flexible about our patterns of worship if we are going to appeal to an ever growing population and include those who are damaged by today's world.

The Equipping for Ministry courses at Woodbrooke are especially enriching and I wish more Friends could embark on such experiences. One can start the journey thinking this and that and then discover new worlds. The new is grounded within the old and takes one further up the mountain as it were. Such sessions at Charney , Claridge House, Swarthmore or Glenthorne or in all sorts of non -Quaker venues give one a chance to stop and be.

Though we like to think that we all have a certain amount of unity of thought about the main Quaker Testimonies, Integrity, Peace, Equality and Simplicity, we actually do not. No longer are these reflections of the Christian ethos at the heart of our Quakerism for many Friends. The Quaker teaching that each day is God's day is for many a very old fashioned idea. The Quaker Peace and Social Witness work is not about making a great song and dance in order to attract more funding, though a bit of that may be necessary! It is an outcome of the Christian action of individual Quakers. The less institutionalised it becomes the more service it can give. I am glad that there is more attention being given to get local meetings to take on work for the whole Yearly Meeting and that in turn they are being supported.

The Biblical material that was the foundation of these ideas was based on such teachings as Mathew 5:21-23 or 38-48 about Peace, ch7:24-27 about Honesty, ch6:19-21,28-31 about Simplicity or Luke 12 25-32 4-6 Love. The Christian Fathers and Mothers have read this material and lived by it and left a rich legacy which is or

has been part of the Quaker tradition and which has acted as a unifying agent. I think it would be prudent to recapture this foundation for our Yearly Meeting outreach. (12)

Too often the only time people think about being a Quaker is in Meeting for Worship on the Sunday. They are glad that Quakers are *doing the Testimonies at Friends House on their behalf* but they would not dream of going off, giving up their job and serving through testimony. They are often already teaching, nursing or in Social Services and they come to meeting to 're-charge their batteries. Again these tasks of healing, teaching, loving and caring are all an outcome, in western society, at least, of Christian foundations with reference to the New Testament. They may become shallow without a spiritual depth to the work, and vigilance is needed throughout each generation to enable Quaker participants, if not everybody, to be certain about the Quaker principles that they will uphold. They may have to stand up and be counted.

One very sad wound in Britain Yearly Meeting is the division about how and where to educate our own children and those of the wider society. From the beginning Quakers educated their children, both girls and boys either at home or in groups. Nonconformists could not go to church schools or universities and so they developed an independent system. We still have six schools left. These schools, as the years have gone by, have been shunned by many Quakers for lots of reasons, not least that they were seen as elitist, beyond the means of parents and not near home. They and their committees, usually made up of enthusiastic Quakers, have made efforts to provide education for all sorts and conditions of need. They have followed Quaker principles and ways and tried to keep the fees within the reach of all, with bursary help. There has been a search, and still is, for a way of being part of the state education service, whilst still maintaining the Quaker ethos.

It is odd that so many Members and Attenders of our Liberal Tradition, that want its members to stand up for freedom and justice and be creative and useful citizens, cannot bear to think of some parents sending their offspring to a Quaker school. If they discover this is happening they are very angry and can be hurtful too. They want the state school to provide all these things, and, if they live in certain areas that may be so. In America, the Testimony to Equality and the Socialist principles that we have, do not seem to be so divisive and Quaker schools are flourishing with Quaker children in them and Quaker staff teaching in them.

We really should deal with this divide and the only way I can think of is to change national policy, so that there is not such a centralised system and in which the professional educators have more power in policy decisions. There are now schools in deprived areas which are being taken over by all sorts of unlikely providers. If one lived there one might well be concerned if it were your child's school or any child's school. What are we doing about it all? The dream of free universal education is turning out to be a bit of a nightmare.

If we understand our tradition we know that the inner person is important, the seed and the Light are there and our children have the potential to live as people of the truth and people of the light. Bringing them up is a delicate matter and you cannot force things upon them. On the other hand choices have to be made for they do not

live without conditioning. We do our best at Meeting, we do our best at home and we do our best at school, but can we do better.

*The conclusion of a study of the educational origins of our country's most productive scientists and scholars sets the direction of our search.*

*By far the most productive of the denominational schools are those sponsored by the Society of Friends. While some of the productivity of those schools may be attributable to their selecting students with high academic aptitude, and while only a minority of the student body are Quakers, these schools are so superior in productivity, not only among the denominational schools but also among all of the schools in the entire sample that it seems probable that a specific Quaker influence is at work.*

*What is this "specific" Quaker influence" that may contribute to a Student's productivity as an adult? (13)*

The problem with Quaker Universalism and Liberalism is that there is no authority and weak discipline. What are you doing in Meeting for Worship, what is the Spirit in the midst, what does sitting in the Light mean, where does the Guidance come from and what holds the community together. How are Elders supposed to do their job? How are those already convinced supposed to inculcate newcomers into the Truth, the Way and the Light? All our Big Outreach Conferences are grappling with this concern and a lot more unity about who we are and what we are would help. Words and talk- talk are not going to appeal to lots of those people out there who are thirsting for meaning to their lives. They need experience of living in a Quaker Community and that is rather lacking if it only happens a few times a year. The Summer Gatherings and the Junior Yearly Meetings are an effort to do this, but we need more of this sort of thing at the local level. Charity begins at home. If we have a healthy Yearly Meeting with families and newcomers then we will be in a better position to do our worldly things. The financial implications are not insurmountable if we get our priorities right.

It is interesting that the Universalists and the Liberals are able to see spiritual values in other major world religions and traditions but do not see anything of value in the practice and belief of Non Liberal Quakers. It is very sad, narrow minded and blinkered if we do not ensure that these people are our Friends. In two years time we shall be holding our World Gathering in Nairobi and we shall be a small voice there.

In the world today there are possibly 300,000 Quakers. Two thirds of these are Christ centred, and usually call themselves members of Quaker Church. Yet they come from the same roots as we do; the Quaker Christian roots. They are also living by the Quaker standards that are rooted in our Quaker inheritance. They still know and read their Bibles'. They believe in a loving and forgiving God and try to follow the teachings of his son Jesus Christ. They know the light within as well as we do. If one moves amongst these people they are found to be sincere about their spiritual life and they rely on it in their daily life far more than we do. They have much to teach us as

we do them. How can bridges be built and traditions shared and respected if we do not meet face to face and call them our Friends.

If you share a meal with Kenyan Quakers you will be given the best that can be offered. A member of the family comes round with a bowl of warm water and sometimes soap too and you wash your hands before the meal. It is rather like the ritual of Jesus washing the Disciples feet in the last supper story. It is spiritually uplifting, it is love and it is community. It is sacramental. We have almost forgotten the sacramental side of our tradition these days.

It is useful to note how the Evangelical churches and Baptists seem to be more adventurous both in their singing and dancing during their gatherings and how they organise themselves into small support groups which meet in each others homes. I certainly found that Quaker Church in Kenya was made up of all the family and they spent a lot of time helping the needy in a multitude of ways. We could do with more of that. There comes the difficulty that we have not got the time to do it these days. There are too few active Friends and they are tied up. Perhaps we need to pay for an Area Overseer who would keep the team of Overseers going by filling the, too often, wide gaps. We pay for wardens who fulfil very varied roles.

I have spent time on outlining the trends that have affected Quakerism in Britain over the past century and a half, because it does form the basis of what the future could be. These trends began in the nineteenth century and coloured the decisions and arrangements that we inherit. They were of their time and leave us struggling to exist as a unified body. We who strive for wholeness belong to a shattered Yearly Meeting. People like Ben Pink Dandelion have for years been warning us that we are hanging on by the skin of our teeth. The thing that holds us together is the seating arrangement in the Meeting for Worship and the flowers on the table and the silent form. With regard to our religious life, we are more certain about our uncertainty than our certainty. You are expected to be a Seeker rather than a Finder. Those who have found some Truth to live by are regarded with suspicion.

I tend to think that, as a yearly meeting, we are in a place where spiritually rewarding developments have taken place over the last hundred or so years. These experiences have broadened us and opened us up. They have modernised us and enabled us to cope with the times. However we are at a point beyond which we shall change, so much, that we will not be part of the world body of Quakers. Our future, in my view, depends upon our being firm about our inherited spiritual tradition. By that I do mean the disciplines and ideas that were there from the beginning. These translated into our own times and as such relevant.

The meetings I have belonged to have been, with but a few exceptions, composed of rather more elderly Friends than not. This trend is getting more marked. Some are so elderly that they are really beyond serving the meeting and grasping the situation in its fullness, but they are still in post, like me. It is getting difficult for Nominations Committees to find people to serve and sometimes a post is filled by someone for years and years. Area Meeting should be more proactive. There is little intervisitation these days and the actual business meeting is just about all there is. Some meetings do not even bother with that. I wonder why we got rid of the Allowed Meetings. Numbers of Quakers in a meeting do matter for survival and there has to be a

reasonable number of experienced Friends available for input. You can have one or two worshipping together week by week and it works for them until they are ill or die and then what?

I know many feel that Quakerism, especially the Silent Tradition, will never appeal to a large number of people. This attitude leads in turn to a mind set that will not even try new ways and is closed and excluding. They continue to meet on a Sunday morning and worship silently for an hour. This may be selfish, if thereby, it excludes unknown others. Barry Reay suggests that there were some sixty thousand Quakers in Britain by the 1660's. What about all those Quakers overseas? Oh say the pessimists, they are the wrong sort of Quaker! How excluding can you be? Are not we also the wrong sort of Quaker then?

George Fox saw Quakerism as the universal home for all. So keep the pure unadulterated Silent Meetings but hold them at different times and ways. Imagine a Sunday morning where you offered refreshments to non Quakers and sang some songs and had a speaker coming in as they do in some Quaker 'churches'. Invite people to join a Silent Meeting in the afternoon and bring their children who will be cared for in an appropriate setting. Yes it would be hard work but hopefully after a few months more adults would be around willing to help, own and participate. There would need to be courses for such new people at Woodbrooke or run by the Area Meeting itself. Perhaps more regional centres would be needed. If for example the group of local Meetings in an Area each did a different thing between 10.30 and 11.30 on a Sunday that would be a change. One or two could hold Silent Meetings, another could have a childrens' workshop, another a Discussion session and another could run a walk of peace and silence in a beautiful place followed by a picnic.

There should be more sharing of the ideas about a Quaker view of the family and of childhood. I found the chapters about the home and the family and the art of living in Christian Faith and Practice so valuable at the time. They had become dated and with the advent of 'political correctness' and problematical, I know, but again in re-writing them so radically we lost the unity that we had about how to live our lives. It is time to try and re-capture a sense of wholeness and family relationship again. We became so concerned about particular situations, such as singleness, feminism, same sex relationships or brokenness, that we almost excluded the typical family with men and women and children living together. We need to re-capture a sense of certainty about the Quaker view of community and this we can share. Society at large is crying out for that. Those who like living on the edge are welcome in our midst and will strengthen us. At the same time balance is also necessary and appropriate. The local meeting is the spring from which we drink. Those who worship in the meeting place are the heartland and the breath.

*Some among us have a clear sense of what is right and wrong- for themselves personally if not everyone else. They have a reassuring certitude and steadiness which can serve as a reference point by which others may navigate. There are others who live in a state of uncertainty, constantly re- thinking their response to changing circumstances, trying to hold onto what seems fundamental but impelled to reinterpret, often even unsure where lies the boundary between fundamental and*

*interpretation.... Please be patient, those of you who have found a rock to stand on, with those of us who haven't and with those of us who are not even looking for one. We live on the wave's edge, where sea, sand and sky are all mixed up together: we are tossed head over heels in the surf, catching only occasional glimpses of any fixed horizon. Some of us stay there from choice because it is exciting and it feels like the right place to be. Philip Rack QF&P 20.06*

We should not shy away from using and upholding our Book of Discipline and our Church Government. We ourselves have to attempt to lead more ordered lives. Quakerism is not a notion but a way, or so we quote. So let us try to mean more to each other and be more aware of each others needs. We should reach out more. So many are the only one in the family to come to the meeting for worship and we need to think of imaginative ways of reaching out to their families and friends. Too often newcomers feel like outsiders for months and even years. No wonder so many drift away. I myself have felt an outsider when I first come newly to a meeting and some are genuine in their welcome and truly inclusive and others are like cold fish.

*Foster put the following into his book on Celebration of Discipline  
Thomas Kelly witnesses:*

*There is a way of ordering our mental life on more than one level at once. On one level we may be thinking, discussing, seeing, calculating, meeting all the demands of external affairs. But deep within, behind the scenes, at a profounder level, we may also be in prayer and adoration, song, and worship, and a gentle receptiveness to the divine breathings.  
( 14 and 15)*

Those who worship in our meetings may need to be led more gently into the traditions and whilst they realise that anything does not go they should never feel excluded from any aspect of the meeting. Everyone has gifts and everyone is wanted and can contribute to the working of the whole. Nothing is so important as this. We are a religious body and we are interested in the lives of all who worship in our midst.

*We need to examine the extent to which, and the ways in which, our contemporary rationalism and liberalism are faithful to the requirements of the listening obedience to the Spirit of God – and how they fall short. ...it's important however, to be careful that we attempt to assimilate only those insights and practices that truly fit. (16)*

The material written by Patricia Loring , especially her *Volume I Living Spiritually* is very useful. Here is much to feed the questing soul with ideas about how to order ones Quaker life. If we introduced some of her adventurous ideas we would make our meetings more interesting and useful to a much wider community.

To summarise, I think to ignore the Quaker tradition will be a huge mistake I think mainstream Quakerism in Britain should be religious and ecumenical and that we should work much more enthusiastically to be part of the world family of Quakers. I think a strong universalistic dimension is also a vital part of our tradition. I hope we shall continue to share spiritual ideas and practice with other traditions but at the same time be firm about our own belief system.

As Patricia Loring says :

*\_ We are obviously at a transition point for this historical period. We must be aware that, historically, we stand poised in the tension between modern and post-modern approaches. Modernist –or Liberal approaches have lost touch with the integrative power of tradition with its attendant coherence, stability and ability to give meaning to our experiences and our lives. Out of the generosity and tolerance, that are two meanings of liberality, we have moved into and beyond a cultural and spiritual relativism. Many of us have not only granted the validity of other religious paths but have gone on to mingle them and confuse them with our own path. The result does not leave us with many paths to wander up the mountain, but rather wandering in the woods at its foot. (17)*

As the Society of Friends, we welcome those who do not hold mainstream views, and, as I have said, we must listen to and share with them. We aim to be an inclusive body and can expect debate and discussion. This can as easily come from non theists as from evangelicals. We have not, in the past hundred years, had the North American experience of division, and we have not therefore had the benefit or challenge of breaking this down and finding healing and common ground. Most British Quakers have no idea how much work has gone into this arena in quite recent years. We do need to examine our membership processes both before we accept people into membership and afterwards how we nurture them. Clear guidance would be helpful in the Church Government material about these matters. We also should spend more time nurturing each other in a wider variety of ways. People like to belong and to do things together and the more of us there are the more likely it is that we shall find soul mates. It requires effort and love.

Too much is left to chance. This is called experience, guidance, light and so on, but if the person is not sure how to settle into silent worship or how to listen in the silence we are being lazy and lacking in discipline. We are leaving them in a kind of limbo. It is a tender area, leading people into the *Quaker Way*, but it is a challenge we have to continue to meet. There is a need to be proactive in the process of induction. We have found something good and we can and will share it. We need to develop some of the fervour and energy that enthused The Valiant Sixty in those early days

If I imagine myself climbing up to Fir Bank Fell on a fairly windy but dry day and if I then meet George Fox up there, what might he say about us. I imagine that he would start with some Biblical reference and go on to suggest that Britain Yearly Meeting



was not fighting the lamb's war with any conviction today. He might say that there was too much wavering and lack of conviction amongst us and that we were therefore not able to dig into the hearts of those around us or water their needs and yearnings for spiritual meaning in their lives.

Obviously the understanding of the words and teachings in the Bible should be of their time so that the wisdom will be fresh and useful to us today. What I am trying to emphasise is that it can be done. It is not easy and not all will have the same picture in the end, thank goodness, but just because it seems irrelevant to Quakerism and the ideas about religion, and theology seem outdated to some, is not a reason to neglect the discipline. We need some unity to live as a community and the unity comes from our historical roots. Remember that the past 150 years has a story to tell and is full of reflection, promises, mistakes and successes which in turn have become our roots.

I hope the next edition of The Book of Discipline keeps to the inherited tradition and continues its heretical but biblical basis. That it encourages us to use many ways in widening and deepening ourselves so that we are able to participate in life to the full as well as to hold our meetings in healing and enriching ways. That we are confident in our ability to be humble learners after truth from whence it comes and able to partake of lots of spiritual exercise in our daily life that helps us to have hands and hearts and minds prepared for the things that happen to us.

To be useful to the wider society we must, at the same time as we hold to our basis and our particular way, also, welcome those we might disagree with politically or creatively. The Society of Friends should welcome the poor the rich, the bad the good, the leaders of society and the servers. The old Biblical sayings come to mind: *judge not that ye be not judged, beware the mite in thine own eye*, and the Quaker advice *think that thou may'st be mistaken.. You may speak truth to truth but so may the other one and it may not be yours.*

*Friends, Our life is love, and peace, and tenderness; bearing one another, and forgiving one another, and not laying accusations one against another; but praying for one another, and helping one another up with a tender hand if there has been any slip or fall; and waiting, till the Lord gives sense and repentance, if sense and repentance in any be wanting. (18)*

If we can hang on to the idea of the presence in the midst we shall be safe. Whatever this means to us *experientially*, for what we know gives meaning to our lives. This meaning is of love and peace, of forgiveness and firmness, of gentleness and bravery. This holds us together in our stillness and is the foundation of our Society of Friends.

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