

Four ways forward

Why do we need an essay on the future of Quakers in Britain Yearly Meeting? Why do we need to look to make changes? The answer, surely, is because the Religious Society of Friends is a living body, constantly – if quietly – changing, as it has done for 350 years. There is life and vigour and energy in us: standing still is simply not possible.

Change is being thrust upon us. We are now being challenged to face considerable changes in our life-style because of our concern for the environment. A reduction of 10% in 2010 of our carbon footprint will be just the start of exploring life-style changes. We may not choose to wear hair shirts, but, in cotton shirts, we shall all want to live simply, that others may simply live.

We are facing economic realities for our local Meetings and central work, as we seek to use our resources well and responsibly. We have valuable roles to play in matters of peace-building, and in the criminal justice system. We are looking to review what we can contribute to strengthening our local communities. Quaker peace and social witness is a programme of principled action.

We are embarking on fresh ways of inviting people who know little about us to join our Quaker quest. A new programme of being companions to those who are becoming Friends, offers us all a programme of individual learning and exploration of the Quaker way. This will be of great benefit to us in renewing our sense of vision and purpose for the future, as we learn more of the present and the past. Our spiritual roots in our gathered meetings, and in our own spiritual explorations are being kindled in a variety of ways within Britain Yearly Meeting.

We have a vision and a message which we want to be heard in the market place. We already use the methods of the digital age, besides personal encounters and the printed page, as we communicate among ourselves. We can also use them to communicate more widely.

We need to discern constructive changes that we can make to ensure our Society thrives in the current environment, to carry forward this vision and mission. Even though we are always likely to remain a minority faith community, we maintain a desire to be a significant influence in the wider community.

However, we have to recognise that these days, with a lot more small Meetings than large ones, most of which have a predominantly elderly membership, we face some similar dangers to those which John Stephenson Rowntree addressed. Some of us can be very reluctant to think outside of the box. Friends who value our ethos, our pattern of worship, witness, and business methods, and treasure the traditions and practices of a life-time, may not wish to be disturbed too much. Finding a balance between what we cherish, and what we seek to change, will not be easy or comfortable, nor acceptable to everyone. Change will come gradually, only after due discernment.

Yet I believe that there are many people who currently do not worship with us, who are in sympathy with our outlook. They are, or could be, fellow travellers with us. They value the things we value, and they could very well find our way of worship meets some of their needs. I suggest there is today still a “great people to be gathered.”

If we are to grow and develop, both in numbers and in influence, the Society of Friends will inevitably change to address the needs and opportunities of our day. The world at large is changing fast, and if we are to be a voice that is heard, and a community to which people wish to belong, we will want to consider how best to open doors and windows, to share with the community at large, the essence of Quakerism in our own day. Many of us readily embrace some of the new initiatives being pioneered in our Society.

Our starting point

The years since 1950 have seen an enormous change from the values, attitudes, and patterns of community life that were common when I was young. I was not then a Quaker, but I sense the Society of Friends did not face the same dilemmas about ways forward that we face now.

In contrast to the 1950s, life in Britain now is characterised by a widespread loss of deference, and a focus on individual choice more than on community well-being. There is no commonly accepted set of values. Many groups and individuals seek to push a number of boundaries, or know little of the concept of boundaries. At the same time, there are people searching for values they can commit to, and a spirituality appropriate for them.

During these sixty years church attendance has fallen drastically. Although there are certainly some growing churches, particularly evangelical and pentecostal churches, and some churches of other traditions have large congregations, many churches have closed. Many more have tiny congregations and struggle to survive. Friends share this experience too: many Local and Area Meetings struggle to find people to fulfil key roles.

The demographic balance both in our Society, and in the population as a whole, has changed. There is now a greater proportion of older people. A growing proportion of people in Britain have family origins from beyond our shores.

Educational and job opportunities have changed, so that pupils remain in full-time education for much longer than they used to do. A much larger proportion of young people go to university and leave home at 18. Authority is often challenged, by pupils and their parents, and by a wide range of citizens. Currently far too many young people as well as older ones are unable to find paid employment. A larger proportion of women have employment across a range of professions and roles. These factors affect Membership and participation in our Meetings.

Addictions – to alcohol, drugs, gambling, television, the internet, and over-eating – are causing a great many health and social problems. Prisons are chock-a-block with a large proportion of prisoners with mental illness, poor educational achievement, and/or addictions. Such consequences face our social witness with new challenges and opportunities for service.

The culture of equality gives greater opportunities for education, employment, relationships and personal fulfilment to people of both genders, all ages, racial origins, religious practice, physical and mental capabilities, and sexual orientation. This causes enormous difficulties for some religious traditions, particularly with same sex relationships and gender equality. As Quakers we have some very positive things to say and to celebrate about the culture of equality in our developing tradition.

From the letter, telephone, radio, and print cameras, we have now moved on to the world-wide web, mobile phones, 24 hour television, i-pods, video and digital cameras. It is easy to travel the world, and to be in regular communication with family and friends on the far side of the globe, as well as in towns and villages nearer home. It is easy to eat out regularly, and there are a wide variety of activities, entertainments, and educational opportunities to be involved in if you have the money and the time. So many people lead very busy lives. We can maintain links by phone, e-mail, Face Book, Twitter, and Skype, if we no longer write letters.

There are more choices and different pressures of life than there were in the 1950s. Any group or organisation that wants now to obtain a hearing in the community has to struggle to do so. Local and national newspapers are under threat from websites, and we may find the opportunities to communicate with our local community via the local press will not last much longer. This is a challenge for us: to make good use of modern methods of communication, we will need to explore and experiment.

Ours is an environment under great threat from our massive carbon footprint, the growing population of the planet, and the way in which industry, commerce, the market economy, freedom of choice, modern science and technology, and a large sprinkling of hedonism, have combined to put the natural world under enormous pressure.

Without a radical change in the way we live, embracing a Zero Growth Economy, and a world without oil, we shall destroy the quality of life for our children and grandchildren, if not for ourselves. As a Society we are taking this to heart, and looking to work in partnership with others who share our concerns on these matters.

The world-wide crisis in banking, and many political, social and ethical issues create an atmosphere in which there is a great need for clear thinking and speaking, from an ethical perspective which offers principles and practices to enhance the common good. Trust, honesty, and integrity have been part of the Quaker tradition from our founding. We need perhaps to regularly to review with care, how we speak truth to power in our own day.

There has been a lively interest in discussing religion and spirituality in recent years. Richard Dawkins and his friends have set a debate in one direction; the debates within Islam and Christianity about beliefs and practices have set debates in other directions.

The volume of books on Spirituality, Mind and Body, Health and Healing, and Religion in modern bookshops testifies to the interests of many people in the community who do not regularly attend a place of worship. Evening classes, retreats, seminars on faith traditions, and on spirituality, are provided not only for those who have a spare-time interest in these subjects, but are often provided by councils, health authorities, and commercial firms for their staff. Widening the horizons of employees with such topics is a regular part of in-service training for some people.

Quaker realities

Being a Quaker is very much a minority interest. There are only about 26,000 of us in Britain Yearly Meeting - 10,000 more than when John Stephenson Rowntree wrote his essay, but we are a much smaller proportion of the total population. We are tiny but distinctive, and rather hidden. While there are Meetings which have groups of lively young Friends, and an active group of adults under the age of 60, most of our Meetings consist predominantly of people born between 1930 and 1960.

Unlike earlier generations of Quakers, we are not replete with local tradespeople with wealth and influence in our local communities, and the freedom to commit time to community service in local government and other avenues of service. There are fewer Quakers today who have grown up in the Society, and a greater proportion who are refugees from other churches – Quakers by conviction rather than by birth and upbringing.

A small proportion of us have a foot in two camps, and share in another faith tradition as well as Quakers. In the last 60 years, the theological perspective of British Quakers has shifted considerably from being firmly rooted in the Christian tradition, to one in which it is legitimate to ask (much to the distress of some Friends) –“Are Quakers Christians?”

Our values and testimonies are very much grounded in perspectives drawn from the Christian gospels and New Testament, but we don't buy into most of the theological statements and pre-occupations of the mainline churches. The language of Advices and Queries is traditionally god-centred and Christian. However there are many Quakers who are uncertain, or unclear about their theological views, or who definitely reject the idea of the traditional view of God, or who tend to ignore such specifics in a way that earlier generations of Friends did not.

Readings from the Bible, prayers, Christian poetry, and First Day Schools are not a common feature of our Meetings today, in the way they were in the days of John Stephenson Rowntree.

Many of us now draw not only on the Christian tradition but those of other faith traditions in our pilgrimage of faith. Our views are often mystifying to many other Christians (and sometimes to our own Members!), and we can too easily be dismissed by some of them as absurdly liberal, “wishy-washy” or “idealistic”, or “not Christian”.

The hiddenness of Quakers

We are a hidden community. Two years ago someone told me they thought Quakers were something to do with Freemasons! So we face incomprehension or misunderstanding, or we are largely invisible. Indeed some people think we have died out!

Years ago, Quakers were very easily identifiable in their communities, not only for their values and conduct, but for their appearance. The Quaker “uniform” especially the bonnet or the broad flat hat, enabled people to pick out Quakers very easily. Now we are hidden. We tend to “dress down”, and though we may wear a badge that says “Quaker”, so many people have no clear idea of what it means to be a Quaker.

This is a tragedy. While we share key aspects of our testimonies with other people of different faith traditions or none, we also have a distinctive voice amongst the faith communities. What we have to say, and what we do, is often much valued by people who do not belong to our Society. Our priority to value Christian conduct more than Christian doctrines is shared by a great many members and adherents of other churches. They include a large number who no longer participate in any form of worship but retain a residual allegiance.

We are not alone in having in our Meetings for Worship people who hold very different ideas of God. We are more aware of this perhaps than people in some Christian churches, because most of us feel free to share our views with others in our Society. Within the Society we are for the most part, both accepted and respected. In many churches, those who have given up on a concept of a God “out there” know that it is usually too uncomfortable to say so within their own faith community.

When faced with the questions or views of either those seeking a spiritual way, or criticism from the articulate people of other faith traditions, too often we find ourselves not very clear or confident in articulating the Quaker way. It is surely important that more and more of us find a way of putting our Quakerism lucidly and attractively to enquirers.

In 1900 the Quaker community in the town in which I live, held First Day schools teaching both adults and children. Many adults learned to read and write, and all the pupils imbibed the Quaker ethos. My experience of joining the Society in 2000 was that there was no systematic teaching to help me grasp the main elements of the Quaker way. It was assumed I would pick it up gradually – by “osmosis” someone said.

These are just some aspects of the setting in which we now seek to find a constructive way forward for our Society. Rather than envisage a complete revolution, the Quaker way is surely to consider, consult, reflect and discern realistic and practical ways forward. Many of our Meetings are small gatherings in which a majority of members are retired, and many of the younger ones are fully stretched at work and in their home life.

Practical ways forward are not likely to be in a multiplicity of committees, which can drain energy rather than revitalise, even though the work they do is important. We do not do evangelism or campaigns. Can we find a way to grow in numbers and influence, to replenish our Meetings, as people find they can connect with us in the Quaker Way? If we do not replenish our membership even to stand still numerically, we shall shrivel and perhaps disappear.

Priorities

While there are, no doubt, many different views on how best to move forward, I suggest we need at this stage to focus primarily on four key priorities. Three of them are elements of the Framework for Action we have adopted for 2009 – 2014. The fourth is to refresh ourselves with the founding vision of our Society.

- 1) **To make the Quaker Way better known in the wider community**, as we speak out to the world. This is a task for every one of us, each in our own sphere of influence, whether that be small or large.
- 2) **To strengthen the spiritual roots in our meetings and in ourselves**. A part of this task will be to help other people find their way in to our Quaker Ways, and spiritual roots, to discover for themselves whether our way is right for them.
- 3) **To nurture the community life of our Meetings**. These days our families are likely to be spread geographically, in Britain and even world wide. Caring for each other within the Quaker community is important. We value the support and encouragement of each other as we seek to live a simpler life-style.
- 4) **To refresh our founding vision**. The vision of the first Friends was to renew the simplicity of the first Christians. They challenged the theology and hierarchy of power in the institutionalised church. Although British Quakerism has moved on from that concern, I urge Friends to look afresh at the founding vision of first Friends, and reshape it for our own day.

Speaking out to the world

Many of us Quakers know what we have experienced, and what we feel; yet we find ourselves often ill-equipped to talk about our Quaker faith and practice. Without a degree course in British Quakerism, how can we build confidence amongst us to be able to speak with clarity and conviction when challenged as to what is the Quaker way?

It will be helpful to find ways to encourage one another to have the confidence to talk about Quaker ways through some of personal contacts we have in the public arena. As we know from our history, as a minority group, it is possible to have a bigger impact on society than our numbers would suggest.

I also think there is a greater hunger for Quaker ways among the wider community than we often realise. Many people today will value a journey in faith which is not burdened by doctrine they cannot accept. Our values and testimonies, our concern to live more simply, have considerable appeal – if only people get to know about them.

Our Society has been traditionally so averse to evangelism after its first 100 years or so. In recent years, a lot of its light has been very well hidden behind a thicket rather than just a bush. We are currently exploring new ways to explain Quakerism to people, and introduce them to our traditions, testimonies, and ways of conducting worship and business. *Quaker Quest*, *Becoming Friends*, and the *Kindlers* are three examples of modern practice, firmly in the Quaker tradition, which are, or will be, helping many people to discover and explore our Quaker ways, leaving people free to opt in or out, without persuasion, compulsion, or any other pressures.

Such activities are sometimes regarded by Members of our Society as the province just of those who are keen, or have a gift for this sort of thing. I want to invite Friends to have a go at some ways in which more of our Members and Attenders may find new confidence to articulate Quaker thoughts and practice, first of all amongst ourselves, and then in expanding circles of family and friends, on to the wider community.

Quaker Conversations

We learn and understand more by teaching or explaining things to others, than just by reading and thinking to ourselves. When we engage in exchanging thoughts and ideas with others, their responses, questions and challenges to our thinking, help us to clarify our own thinking.

We try out words to explain what is going on inside us. As we do so, our thoughts becomes clearer, and our choice of words more apt. As we try out forms of words, we discard those which we find are not very productive. We grow clearer and more confident in articulating our own thoughts. Those who like to write their ideas down also find greater clarity as they put into words what they are thinking or feeling, and then reflect and adapt what they have written.

So if we want to strengthen our ability to speak to others about our Quakerism, I think it will be helpful to encourage a lot more *Quaker Conversations* between Friends and friends around our Meetings. By that I mean the opportunity after many (clearly not all) of our Meetings for Worship to explore aspects of Quaker faith and practice. A Meeting might consider doing so one Sunday each month for a number of months, or on several consecutive Sundays, or weekdays, exploring specific themes that interest some of the Members.

Some Meetings have already discovered a value in Afterwords – where thoughts which were not voiced in Meeting for Worship can be expressed. This has in some Meetings stimulated a number of valuable discussions over coffee which might otherwise not have happened.

Quaker Faith and Practice 12.20 encourages us to value meeting together in small groups. Elders and Overseers are invited to consider it part of their role to review the needs and workings of small groups in their meetings. Many of us find deepening friendships, growing understanding, and stimulating knowledge, through meeting Friends and friends in home groups, discussion groups, sharing with a soul-friend, or exploring our journey in faith with a spiritual guide.

My experience as a counsellor was often that in giving individuals the opportunity, in a safe environment, to put into words what they were thinking or feeling, gave many of them the chance to clarify their thoughts, and develop a greater degree both of clarity and of self-confidence. Often, in reflecting back to them what they had said to me, they really listened to themselves in a way they had not been doing before this.

So for example when someone who consulted me was faced with having to explain to colleagues at work why they had been absent for some weeks due to illness, they were often stressed at the thought of doing so – particularly if the reason for absence was due to stress. When that was the case, we worked out together what she or he felt was appropriate to say.

Many of them were inclined to feel their best strategy was to say nothing by way of explanation. This could cause other difficulties, and often did when they tried to adopt it. However once they had tried out some possible explanations to give that they were comfortable with, their own confidence grew, and they became more relaxed.

Respect and love for those of different views

From those experiences I learnt the great value of helping someone to explore different ways of articulating what they were feeling, or wanted to say. This meant that when they needed to explain or describe something to another person or group, I invited them to try some different ways of doing so with me, using their words not mine. They were then equipped with ideas and words, and felt more confident about using them, instead of having their anxieties about what to say churning around inside them. They could then more easily call upon words suitable to the circumstances in which they found themselves.

I feel that we Quakers could benefit so much from more opportunities to explore with one another how we can best describe our experiences, beliefs, views, and ways of being, with others. It is not our way to establish a “doctrinal orthodoxy” – each of us is open to the Light, and may be illumined in different ways. Our common bond is our fellowship, and our tradition of worship, business, and witness. However we have the opportunity to deepen and develop our experience of the Quaker way when we share our different experiences and views with others.

It is clearly important that in our Meetings we can explore our different views with some respect and love for those whose views are different from ours. It is sad that there are Friends who feel unable to discuss their feelings and views openly with other Friends for fear of a strong rejection of their views. How we handle disagreements – with love, respect, understanding, sensitivity, and compassion – speaks volumes for our Quaker way. When we fail to handle disagreements well, our fellowship is fractured and impaired.

This has been the experience of some conservative Friends with a traditional view of the Christian faith. They see the Society of Friends as a group seeking to regain the original simplicity, vision and practice of the early Christians. Some of them have felt it unsafe to voice too clearly their Christian convictions with other Friends. On the other hand, It has been equally true for some liberal universalist Friends, who have found their ideas unwelcome in their Local Meeting or in other gatherings of Friends.

As Pam Lunn wrote in 1990 (QFP 26.76) "There are those [Friends] who comfortably talk in Christian language, because they experience it deeply as expressing truth and reality as they perceive it. For them it is not "just a language"; it *is* the truth. There are those who just cannot use that language at all, because for them it precisely does not express their deepest truths, and may in fact be felt to deny or even violate them. For these people, their deepest experiences of spiritual reality, as they have encountered it, cannot be encompassed by a language that has acquired so many historical accretions and distortions that it has become at best meaningless and at worst a falsification of truth. So they must grapple with the equal inadequacy of contemporary language to express the depths of their searching."

Too often these differences have become a real burden in some Meetings. Some Friends urge their own ideas, wanting all of us to adopt them. Sadly such views are sometimes rehearsed from positions well dug in, with little real listening to the experiences, thoughts, and journeyings of those who see things differently.

I hope to see the Society of Friends become more and more a safe place where Friends can feel comfortable exploring ideas with other Friends of rather different views. We can thereby demonstrate to ourselves as Quakers, as well as to others, that people of different theological views can live together in harmony.

Some churches have great difficulty in holding together those with very different views of God, or of Biblical authority, and appropriate life-styles for people of homosexual or lesbian orientation. We Quakers often feel we have a distinctive vocation to practice plain speaking with love, sensitivity, and loyalty to the truth as each of us sees it.

At the Meeting House I attend, we have a Book Club which meets at present once a month. Those who attend, half of whom are not Quakers, have a range of Christian views. One accepts literally the Bible stories and is content not to question but to accept teaching from a pulpit. Another is a conservative Christian. A third is a retired vicar who has a lifetime of happily accepting orthodox Christian doctrine. Others of us are very liberal and open in our approach to Biblical material, and the classic doctrines of the Christian faith.

We seek to respect and understand each other. We are not out to persuade each other – simply to explain our own views of the material we are all reading, and listen to those who view the same material differently. We deal tenderly with difference. All of us gain a great deal by listening with care to views we do not share. We may learn something, and sometimes it helps us clarify our own views.

That is the spirit I hope will be encouraged in all *Quaker Conversations*. As we Quakers talk more often and in more depth together, we will listen to ourselves and each other, as we put into words our Quaker approach on a variety of subjects.

We all do talk – not always in much depth. Some Friends feel uncomfortable about talking in depth in a group, and deftly turn the conversation to social or mundane threads. I believe our *Quaker Conversations* could be encouraged in a number of different ways, without giving ourselves too much of a hot-house atmosphere of intensity.

Confidence to communicate our Quaker views

Becoming more familiar with reading and discussing sections of Quaker Faith and Practice has helped many of us to grow in confidence in talking about our Quakerism. On the other hand, a current news item could be the focus for reading, thinking and then talking with other Friends about our approach as Quakers to the topical issue.

Similarly a passage from the scriptures, whether Christian, Hebrew, or any other faith tradition, or from secular wisdom, can be a focus for exploring with Friends how that parable, story, teaching, psalm, prayer, poem or prose speaks to us. Any of these topics have the potential to enable us to enter into discussions with friends, colleagues, neighbours, and people of other religious convictions. As we do so, we have the chance to increase the clarity and confidence with which we speak of our Quaker perspectives.

In our Area Meeting we invited all our Local Meetings to explore two questions:

How does our Meeting enable us to engage with one another at the deepest level?

How can our Meeting further enrich our experience of the Quaker way?

Through the responses to these questions we learnt that while the informal chat over coffee after Meeting provides the valued opportunity to engage with one another with personal and family news, a number of Friends found they thought first of our gathering for our Book Club. When we held our two series of Quaker Quest, many Friends found they gained personally a great deal from hearing other Friends speak to the theme of the evening. They had not heard those Friends talk in that way before.

Systematic learning and informal education

We do have from time to time days like Woodbrooke-on-the-road, or Northern Friends Peace Board, a Retreat, or a New Members and Attenders Day, and Friends go to Woodbrooke and other centres for residential courses. They are all very valuable. However, I feel the lack of a systematic enrichment of our understanding of the Quaker way within our local Meeting. We have a library in our Meeting House, and some of us read regularly; but nurturing a confidence in articulating Quaker approaches to issues, and Quaker convictions, can benefit from something more.

I would value more opportunities for discussing together aspects of the Quaker approach to life, to values, to ideas. While some Friends may choose to do this in a structured programme like *Hearts and Minds Prepared*, I sense that many Friends are more likely to respond to more flexible explorations. I have never been a Young Friend, but from their epistles I gather they engage a great deal more in exploring issues together when they meet than we older Friends often do. We can benefit from taking a leaf from their book.

I do not wish to emulate the black and white thinking of some fundamentalist Christians who are well versed in Biblical quotations, and have been trained through regular educational groups to explore and articulate their beliefs and experiences with great earnestness and clarity. However I would like us to help one another find an articulate voice, to explain why we take the particular viewpoint we do, and be able to challenge in a Quakerly way contrary ideas and ways of thinking.

George Fox certainly challenged the views of those he encountered. We no longer find it appropriate to use George's strident language, and we prefer a gentler approach than the ones he often used. However, the opportunities to present Quakerism to those who do not know it, are surely to be valued. To make best use of them, equipping ourselves by having learned to do so amongst our Friends, will give us confidence.

Engaging the community

There are many ways in which we can consider conveying Quakerly views and practice to the wider community. Many of us do not easily talk about our Quakerism with friends, family, or our colleagues in paid or voluntary work. We are reserved, or shy, or in some cases, simply inarticulate. We don't wish to be preachy, or wear our sacred heart on our sleeve, so we keep quiet. We have good things in our hidden Quaker treasure: other people are deprived if we do not share some of them more widely.

In the variety of ways in which Friends work for peace, for environmental concerns, in caring for those in need, in contributing to the criminal justice system, and in strengthening our local communities by addressing inequalities, poverty, and injustice, as well as in the way we live our lives in our own families and our Quaker community, our lives speak. A wise choice of words can also speak, and help clarify thoughts and understanding for others.

However others are only enlightened as to where the source of our attitudes, behaviour and convictions spring from if we can tell them. Many of us can be helped to do so through *Quaker Conversations*.

If we want to reach out, we cannot just expect or hope enquirers will find us and call in. Giving time to consider together the appropriate ways Friends in each Local Meeting can make the Quaker presence known more clearly in our communities will be time well spent. There are many people who will be grateful to us for doing so.

Having grown in confidence in putting our thoughts about Quakerism into words, there are many ways in which we can then put those words before others. We hope some – perhaps many - will welcome what we seek to communicate.

Those of us who use a computer have a wealth of opportunities literally at our finger-tips. There is a vast market place of information and exchange of views on the world wide web. Some of us may choose to put a personal profile, with our views on various topics, on *Face Book*. Some may *Twitter* to convey in a series of brief sentences Quaker ideas. I read recently that those promoting the peace movement are making good use of *Twitter* to catch the eyes of those who search on-line.

Already we hear of older people, who are housebound or isolated in other ways, maintaining their social contacts and friendships using their computers, just as younger people do. Besides maintaining friendships, we can also speak from our Quaker experience and convictions to a wider audience. Some of us may develop websites, or contribute to those of our Meeting, or Area. Some of us may contribute to other people's blogs, ideas, thoughts, and convictions that arise from our Quakerliness.

Others of us can perhaps contribute to national and local debates on phone-ins, or websites. It is important that we identify our Quaker adherence, otherwise once again we shall remain hidden. Some of us may wish to write letters to national or local newspapers, to magazines, or blogs. All these can be dispatched by e-mail.

There are many people within our Society who would be able to write articles for newspapers and magazines. The range of possible publications is considerable. County magazines, magazines specifically for women or for men or for young people (or older ones like *Saga*), newspapers or magazines of other faith communities, and those specialising in history, or architecture, and many more all provide opportunities for us to convey messages about Quakers.

The message may have to be wrapped up in a theme appropriate to the particular publication, but it can still communicate something important about Quakers today – and not just those in the past. Those readers whose interest is stimulated will find a way of making contact with us to find out more, especially if we provide website, e-mail or postal addresses.

As we build up our confidence in how we articulate our Quaker views, it may help a number of us to explore, and encourage one another, to try one or more of a variety of ways of communicating to the wider world through different media. Friends House always find an increase in requests for their Information Packs on Quakers after articles, broadcasts, or other means of bringing aspects of Quakerism to the wider public.

In the week of Britain Yearly Gathering and following, there was at least one article in the national press: the request to Friends House for enquirers' packs rose from 20 (the number for that week in 2008) to 163 in 2009, and for the whole two week-period covering the conference 237 people wanted such packs (up from 39 for the similar period in 2008).

Such articles do not have to be only on serious subjects. Sometimes a lighter touch of humour can communicate better than the earnest thoughts of those of strong convictions.

There are opportunities for those with a gift for creative writing – whether poetry, prose, or drama. My daughter-in-law (a Catholic) gained a new perspective on Quakers through reading the novel *Notes from an Exhibition* by Patrick Gale. It features (in an incidental manner) the way the Quaker community supported the family whose mother had bi-polar disorder. She was impressed, drew it to my attention, and asked questions about Quakers she had not asked before.

Other forms of art, not just words either spoken or printed, can be used by Friends with different skills to convey something of their spiritual roots. Pictorial art, painting, sketching, cartoons, and other art forms such as ceramics, sculpture, embroidery, quilting, knitting, can each in their own way convey a Quakerly approach to life and values, and be used as talking points, or subjects for reflection and meditation. Music and singing can do so very powerfully.

Modern forms of visual art such as photography, video, and cartoon, can be used to express a host of inner creativity which can convey aspects of our Quaker Way.

A toe in the water of Quaker worship

As we attract interest to what Quakers do or say, and people choose to make contact with us, I think it likely to be helpful to look at innovative ways of helping people explore in stages, our pattern of worship.

Not everyone is able to deal with an hour of silence at the introduction stage. Many people these days live by choice in a world of perpetual noise from radio, television, and i-pod. Some work in an environment of non-stop music.

There can be many creative ways of helping those addicted to the companionship of music and voices to explore increasing amounts of silence. The “cold turkey” of immersion into an hour of silence is not one that everyone interested in the Quaker way can find helpful. A young student who came to three of our Quaker Quest evenings opted out of the remaining three because half an hour of silence at the end of the evening was oppressive to him!

Without disturbing the regular pattern of the Sunday morning Meeting for Worship, I hope we can explore different ways of giving people the opportunity to sample silence in smaller doses! We can advertise these to the wider public in various ways. There is a hunger among quite a section of the population to explore silence in imaginative ways, as Buddhist meditation classes demonstrate.

A Centre for Spirituality in the region where I live has a monthly Saturday morning opportunity for beginners, seekers and experienced people to share silence together. They have a short introduction on some aspect of meditation lasting no more than 10 minutes, and then two 20 minute periods with a time for breathing, stretching and walking exercises as part of the meditation between the two periods of silence.

After a half hour break for refreshments, the process is repeated for another hour. People can take part in the whole two and a half hours, or just either the first or last hour and the refreshments. They average over 30 people each month. They draw people from across the Christian denominations, from House Churches, Baptists, Methodists, to those with a more liturgical tradition such as Anglicans and Catholics.

Creative ways with silence can use other approaches, at times other than Sunday morning. Introducing a picture – a painting, a cartoon, a poster or photograph – and inviting people to reflect and discuss what they find in it, can be a helpful preparation for a period of silent contemplation. This is a way of helping some people to find a way of using silence they may come to cherish.

A poem, a story, a parable, our own creative writing, an extract from some sacred writings like Quaker Faith and Practice, the Bible, the Koran, or other sacred or secular literature, can all be used similarly to engage thoughts that help people explore the silence.

It can be quite surprising how a collection of interesting pebbles or stones, or everyday objects can speak to us, as we look at them, handle them, and consider what they say to us. Such an exercise can also lead into a period of silence. Similarly a piece of music, or focus on a candle flame can lead people fruitfully into silence.

There are a variety of Quaker books – beginning with *Journeying the Heartlands – exploring spiritual practices of Quaker worship* – edited by Elizabeth Brown and Alec Davison, *The Amazing Fact of Quaker Worship* by George Gorman, and Rex Ambler's *A light to live by* which can help people explore the Quaker way of worship, and the use of silence.

We can offer people periods shorter than an hour, at mid-week Meetings for Worship, either day-time or evening, where they can explore aspects of Quaker Worship in smaller doses than an hour.

If we communicate what we have on offer, by advertising such events as open to beginners, I hope we find we are offering something which quite a number of people are looking for. Imaginative advertising can make a considerable difference to the response we get.

Some members of other churches have valued an invitation from Quakers to explore the Quaker way as an add-on to their regular liturgical practice in their own church. Personal invitation is much more helpful than a notice on a website, a leaflet through the door, or a poster in a window.

Co-operating with other Christian groups, and offering them the experience of Quaker worship as part of a shared programme, is a good way of helping many people to experience and understand aspects of Quaker worship.

Local meditation groups can be invited to experience our way of worship. It may supplement their other forms of worship, or it may draw them to the Quaker way as the way for them. We provide the opportunity, and it is up to the Spirit where it may lead anyone.

If we are creative in offering many different opportunities to experience our way of worship, and understand what we are seeking through it, we may help many to appreciate more clearly our Quakerism.

Sometimes people need help to appreciate that being still, listening, waiting, communing, can be cleansing, healing, and life-enhancing – as people often discover for themselves if they are given the opportunity. It is important to spell out that our testimonies spring from this way of worship. The silence is not just an indulgence – though it can be. It is a feeding of the spirit, that sees living out of our values as the natural corollary of worship.

We are a “do-it-yourself” church, without paid ministers. Sharing our Quakerism will only happen if more of us are perhaps prepared to venture beyond our comfort zone from time to time, and work with other Friends, to organise such opportunities for outreach, which time and again benefit the existing Friends as well.

Base communities

Reading about Quaker business practice in the past helped me to realise the importance of the community life of Quakers in the 18th century. Some Friends who were successful merchants or manufacturers lent money to help other Friends to establish or sustain their businesses. Trust was a crucial factor. Lenders could trust borrowers because they were members of the same Society. They were known, and they shared the same values. The Society exercised a discipline on both parties. A bankrupt Friend would be expelled from the Society. A lazy or less than honest Friend, would be challenged by their Elders, and could be disciplined.

Quaker banks came to be trusted because of the integrity of the bankers, the cohesiveness of the Society, and the influence of significant Friends. Quakers were noted for the integrity of their practice.

Attitudes within and without the Society have moved on, so none of us would now welcome the rather powerful exercise of Quaker convictions and authority practised by some Elders of the Quaker “aristocracy” in the past. What perhaps we can value more is the sense of belonging to a supportive family, with shared values, and a similar approach to living more simply.

Small groups of Friends – either the whole or part of a Meeting for Worship – or networks of Friends from different Meetings with shared ideas and approaches, can be a means of revitalising both our Society and our local communities. When Friends are daunted by the fact that there are only one or two Friends in a Meeting who share a similar concern with us, we can now be encouraged by finding other like-minded Friends via the internet. Ideas, thoughts, experiences can be shared with others in the next village, town, country or continent! This too can lead to discernment, and action.

Young Friends lead the way in this. They meet only occasionally at national or regional gatherings, but pursue a number of their friendships electronically.

The very fact that we Quakers do not have a hierarchy, means that every Friend is free to express a concern. We can follow a leading, seek to engage others to the enterprise, and having tested the concern within the Society, can move into action if others are convinced of the rightness of this leading. We are not subject to a veto from ordained ministers – we can be free spirits, with our freedom constructively channelled in our traditional ways of testing concerns.

We do not have to channel our energies into committee meetings: we can channel them into action groups, pairs or teams, within and without the Society of Friends. The transforming spirit comes from our spiritual roots. Vision, hope, joy, compassion, love, patience, kindness, faithfulness, generosity, gentleness, peace, are all elements of that spiritual life.

We nurture one another in our fellowship meals, and meetings. We care for one another, visit one another, keep in contact when things are difficult, and seek to provide practical help when it is needed. Such groups have considerable potential to act and exemplify their vision, as Catholic Christians for example in South America have shown.

Catholic base communities in South America are groups of people who come together to discuss a Bible passage, and then focus their actions on Christian social justice. They form cohesive and supportive groups. There are some 80,000 such base communities in Brazil alone, the world's most populous Roman Catholic nation. World-wide, nearly one million catholic "Bible circles" meet regularly to read and discuss scripture from the viewpoint of social justice and community concerns. The members of these groups have made a considerable impact on the communities in which they live.

If the principles of Quaker Faith and Practice were widely discussed, understood, and applied in the general community, our communities would be transformed in many attractive ways. As we all respond to the considerable challenges and changes that a zero growth economy, and radical reductions of fossil fuels will bring us to, we will benefit very much from the support, nurture, encouragement, and shared vision of each other.

At a meeting of the Alliance of Religions and Conservation at Windsor Castle in autumn 2009, the Secretary General of the United Nations Ban Ki-Moon invited faith communities to provide a lead in conservation practices for the well-being of the people of this planet. This will increasingly be a concern of Friends in BYM and will challenge every Meeting and each individual Friend. Most of us will benefit from the support and encouragement of each other to make some big adjustments in our life-style.

This is a message about the Republic (rather than the Kingdom) of God – the lived experience of Christian community which lies at the heart of the Christian gospel. It is about sharing, togetherness, freedom, and service. It is an earthed faith, passionate about engagement. It is about speaking truth to power, and confronting abuses of power and closed mindedness. It is about the significance of each individual and her or his unique concerns.

The small group is the milieu in which most people can function effectively, and on which all human institutions are built. It is the environment in which caring and sharing, close yet open relationships, can truly flourish. It also is a milieu in which differences and diversity can be welcomed and indeed celebrated.

We do not have to imitate slavishly the base communities which have made such a significant impact on society in many parts of the world. We can adapt the concept to suit our Quaker tradition. We can nourish, stimulate, and encourage one another through regular engagement with each other about our Quaker concerns. That is how the Society of Friends came into being, as George Fox and his friends did just that – amongst other things.

Engaging with our founding vision

British Quakerism has developed in a way that is markedly different from the majority of Quakers world-wide. Although our *Quaker Faith and Practice* is clearly imbued with Christian language and a vision of the godly life, we are tending to gradually drift away from familiarity with the texts which all Christians share – the Bible.

The archaic language, and concepts such as miracles, demons and angels, are a big “switch-off” for many of us. We are uncomfortable with the thought that “this is the word of God”, and many of Jesus’ actions, parables, poetry and teachings seem almost too familiar. Even more off-putting are the presentations of God in the Old Testament as jealous, vindictive, punishing, even though there are the great prophetic passages about the love, the justice, and the compassion and forgiveness of the divine Yahweh. Yet I suggest that from whichever angle we come at these classic scriptures, we can find great depths of insight, challenge, encouragement, solace, inspiration and much more. We find in them the deepest things that we are looking for.

The past 200 years have seen a considerable development in knowledge of the background to the Bible, and in the critical study of its text. Discoveries in Egypt and Jordan in the late 1940s have opened a whole new understanding of familiar texts. What is surprising to many of us is that those Christians who spurn much of this knowledge and still take more or less a literal view of the Bible, are those whose churches are the largest and often the liveliest.

In contrast, many British Quakers have welcomed modern biblical scholarship as a refreshing freedom from the Christian thinking many of us grew up with. The writings of Marcus Borg, Karen Armstrong and our own David Boulton, amongst others, open for us new ways of engaging with the biblical story as metaphor, mixed with history, geared to promoting a particular theological perspective.

Like many British Friends, I regard religion as a human creation rather than a divine revelation. For me, religion is a human attempt to explain the mystery in life, to make sense of our experience of the profound "Other" – what Rudolph Otto in *"The Idea of the Holy"* calls the "numinous". For me, all our concepts of God are the projection of the highest, noblest, most compassionate and loving being that humans can conceive of.

The experience many Friends have is of being personally guided when they are open to the Spirit, or the Light, or God is one I respect and honour. What may be the origin of that experience, or of creation, I am content to regard as a profound mystery. I no longer try to analyse and conceptualise the vastness of the unknowable.

I appreciate that, on the other hand, many British Quakers have perhaps a more profound notion and experience of the God in the life of Jesus of Nazareth, than I do. I also appreciate that people with different concepts and experiences of religious life can share together in a rich fellowship of love and concerns.

Christians of many different hues can all draw our inspiration from the gospels. We can explore the rich biblical material in a variety of ways and find truth there – just as we can do from great novels, classical Greek myths, the stories of Hans Christian Anderson, and the rich insights of poets, mystics, artists, and musicians.

The gospels have been analysed and probed more than any other text in history. Still through them we hear a distinct and remarkable voice – of Jesus - whose teachings (however distorted at times) have had a more profound impact on human development than any other person in history. They can be engaged with afresh in every age. I think we Quakers neglect them too easily today.

Without a familiarity with the scriptures we share with all other Christians, we will have no common ground to share with them our own unique insights. We will talk entirely different languages. With a common text, regarded from very different viewpoints, we can at least have the chance of a meaningful conversation. Being able to explore some of the biblical material intelligently and imaginatively provides a bridge that others may choose to cross, from either a fundamentalism, or at least an unexamined literalism to much of the biblical material, into something many of us find a richer, freer, more adventurous exploration of the Christian tradition.

There are Christians looking for exactly what we have to offer, but they do not realise they can find it in our British Quaker tradition. If they do not, many will simply give up on Christianity. However many of them could find a home with us, and make a valuable contribution to our Meetings and our Society as a whole.

The historian G.M.Trevelyan wrote in his *“English Social History”* in 1944 “The finer essence of George Fox’s queer teaching, common to the excited revivalists who were his first disciples, and to the “quiet” Friends of later times, was surely this – that Christian qualities matter more than Christian dogmas. No Church or sect had ever made that its living rule before. To maintain the Christian quality in the world of business and of domestic life, and to maintain it without pretension or hypocrisy, was the great achievement of these extraordinary people. England may well be proud of having produced and perpetuated them. The Puritan pot had boiled over, with much heat and fury; when it had cooled and been poured away, this precious sediment was left at the bottom.” (*Chapter 9 – Restoration England*)

With such a tradition, I would like to see the Religious Society of Friends in Britain Yearly Meeting providing a new vision of the intelligent and emancipated Christian life, contributing to the well-being of society as a whole. This is essentially what the first Friends did in George Fox’s time.

We do not espouse a biblical literalism: we look for that Spirit which inspired the writings, and seek to understand and live by that Spirit in our own day.

The majority of Christians know nothing of our distinctive tradition in this regard. I believe many these days would warm to it, if we help them learn of it through reaching out, and being able to share with them among other parts of our tradition, an intelligent engagement with the Bible.

At the same time, I think it is important we do not cast ourselves off from our Friends throughout the world. We British Quakers are a tiny minority of Quakers across the five continents. For the vast majority of Friends throughout the world, it is not only our shared commitment to some degree of silent waiting and attentive listening in our worship, nor just our shared commitment to peace, to environmental concerns, to equality and social justice which binds us together. It is also our shared Christian heritage, and the significant attention we give to the Hebrew and Christian scriptures.

If we only think and worship and associate with those with whom we see eye to eye we limit our lives and our influence, and we will diminish our contribution to the life of Friends world-wide. I hope we will take seriously the wisdom of our Friend Isaac Pennington who in 1659 wrote, “And oh, how sweet and pleasant it is to the truly spiritual eye to see several sorts of believers, several forms of Christians in the school of Christ, every one learning their own lesson, performing their own peculiar service, and knowing, owning and loving one another in their several places and different performances to their Master, to whom they are to give an account, and not to quarrel with one another about their different practices (Rom 14.4). For this is the true ground of love and unity, not that such a man walks and does just as I do, but because I feel the same Spirit and life in him.”(Quaker Faith & Practice 27.13)

Conclusion

Friends 150 years ago, took to heart the encouragement of John Stephenson Rowntree to really look afresh at our Society, and seek to discern what changes were needed to enable the Society to flourish in new circumstances. We face a similar challenge today in Britain Yearly Meeting. I offer these thoughts to Friends as a contribution to a process of discernment that I trust will have a fruitful outcome.

I seek to be realistic about what is possible given the resources of our people in our Meetings, and in our central work, as well as in our buildings and money, and the ways in which we make decisions and move forward.

I acknowledge that I am not fully conversant with the detail of our central work, nor of many of the initiatives of local and area Meetings. I am a Quaker by conviction, and have been so pleased to find a spiritual home in which I can grow. There is no other Christian community that I could feel it so appropriate for me to belong to.

I do so want to bring the richness of the Quaker way to others who would find in us a true home. For that to happen, I believe there has to be a stronger desire amongst us all, and a willingness to act, to enable it to happen. I hope we can

- Make our Quaker way better known in the wider community.
- Strengthen our spiritual roots in our Meetings and in ourselves.
- Nurture the community life of our Meetings.
- Renew our engagement with our founding vision.

I believe that if these things begin to happen, they are likely to have a rejuvenating impact on the Meetings of British Friends. From that rejuvenation, will inevitably flow many practical applications of Quaker attitudes, principles, testimonies, and relationships, from which growth in numbers and influence are likely to come.
