

The Future of the Society of Friends in Great Britain

What I can say to guide Quakerism in Britain over the coming decades.

Dear Friends

In 1994 Friends wrote¹ "We are seekers but we are also holders of a precious heritage of discoveries. We, like every generation, must find the Light and Life again for ourselves. Only what we have valued and truly made our own, not by assertion but by lives of faithful commitment, can we hand on to the future..." There can be no better guide to the coming decades than this. With humility I offer this supplement to those words:

I am not about to propose structural changes to the Yearly Meeting. Nor do I feel a "compelling analysis" to be helpful. I believe we need a change of heart, not sharper minds. I am going to address Friends as individuals, as citizens, members of their local Meeting and as parents. I believe that corporately we have to some extent lost our way. The recent debate over our registration as charities exposed this. Most concern was over the lost income we might forfeit if we failed to register. Few Friends gave much weight to the deeper question: To whom are we answerable, God or the State? In subtle ways the state is more and more intrusive in the cause of "national security".

I fear for the time when Friends refuse to support each other in non violent protest because of the threat to our charitable status.

So, first: look around at those with whom you worship. Where do they live, what do they do? Are they successful "in the world", with satisfying careers and exciting holidays, sophisticated tastes and children in good schools? Are they disturbed or happy? They should be disturbed. If they are for the most part, happy, then I suggest it is time to leave your Meeting. Everywhere throughout the world there are people through whom God is crying out in despair or hunger or pain at the injustice inflicted on Him through the acts of The Happy. How can anyone who loves God not be disturbed! If you can find a prophetic voice to move the Happy in your Meeting, then God be with you, otherwise leave and seek out others like yourself.

Second: forget you are in "great" Britain. Strip away any pretensions that you may have acquired from those around you that your privileged position is meaningful to anyone else in the world. Be humbled by the energy, the vision, the confidence of peoples who, just a few generations ago aspired to be like the British. It is clear to me that they want our technical assistance, probably our health, perhaps even our standard of comfort. But they will use our gadgets in their own way and for their own ends. Most of all they will think in their own way, from their own traditions.

¹ Quaker Faith and Practice 1994 edition; Introduction

Think of yourself first as European, not first as British, or English, Welsh, northerner or southerner. Your education is not complete until you have visited the institutions of the European Parliament and talked – not to the politicians and bureaucrats – but to the others who have come like you to visit. Listen to their hopes and fears and consider how they match your own. Recognise that those politicians and diplomats that created this great institution had the same motives as yourself. You will find they too consider themselves as Children of God. Although the world is still riven by war and strife Europe has forged an instrument for peace that only the most optimistic could have foreseen a century ago.

We have a considerable advantage over members of other denominations in that we do not look for leadership from a pastor or ordained minister. You must not squander that advantage by passive waiting for someone else to take the important initiatives. Early Friends were not led by George Fox, they were enabled by him. His society was full of dissatisfied people seeking some better way, and he showed it to them. But we must not lull ourselves into waiting for a modern reincarnation of George, any more than we wait for a physical Second Coming of Christ. George had discovered that Christ was already come to him, and he showed others how they could understand that reality for themselves. Today this is not helpful language for many Friends, but the truth behind the language is just as important. The empowering experience of Pentecost has been repeated throughout Christendom and demands powerful language to describe it. To be sure that language will be different from that of the Gospel writers, but the medium will be the same: face to face contact – people meeting people – is the only way. It is slow and by modern terms it is inefficient, and there will be public figures, writers, statesmen and even evangelists, whose influence will be important, but one by one we must take up the challenges ourselves.

Our Meetings for Worship tend to become cosy and repetitive, and I have always found it stimulating to recognise a new face in Meeting, as I know this can mean a turning point for that person, and for any of those present. Will God want me to provide that turning point? Will I be given new words? How will I respond to this newcomer's actions? When no newcomer is present what will I do? Can I bring that same expectancy to every Meeting? Jack Hoyland who I met in my youth said "Do nothing for as long as you can." He was not advising idleness but, speaking from his own experience he knew that he could be confident that, when the time was right, the Lord would show him what he needed to do. So, our Meetings should not be only for worship, praise and thankfulness, but for expectancy. Not only for petition, but for reception.

If you read this and dismiss it as the rant of an old fool, you will be happy to know that I shall soon leave you to your own devices. For I am indeed an old fool. My parents, both Friends, enrolled me as a birthright Friend, and sent me to a Quaker school. I worked through my national service with the post war successor to the

Friends Ambulance Unit, then trained and taught in Secondary Schools for twenty years. I married a Friend and separately and together we have served the Society locally and nationally. This included service as a co-President of Cytun, Churches Together in Wales. Now we live in the far west, worshipping in a very small Meeting and conscious of the difficulty our Area Meeting is having in finding Friends to continue this service. As the threat of nuclear proliferation deepened I became disturbed. I became angry. I had been led by God to take up teaching and I felt led by God to give it up, but I did not know what work He had in mind for me. I felt He was leading me into Industrial Mission, but Friends could not see it. Two years later the government was preparing to welcome cruise missiles and I threw myself into CND while supported by Joan's salary. It took the passion of the young people, many of them not Quakers, to wake the Friends' Meetings up and down the country to the work they would have to do. That threat has receded to be replaced by another more immediate and insistent, but what will wake up Friends this time?

Some years ago Margaret Heathfield² reminded us that we are not the National Trust at prayer. We are first not a campaigning body, however passionately we feel about social issues, even about global warming. Just as we do not measure the sense of the Meeting by counting votes, we must not measure our corporate strength by counting heads. Early Friends felt that by gaining more and more converts they were bringing God's Kingdom nearer. But they became institutionalised and conventional in their unconventionality. Looking back we can see that even the new life wrought by the Manchester Conference and its follow up debates failed to take into account the new truth of Darwin's insights into creation. Friends brought Quakerism to a wider society and shared a new social awareness, but many avoided the awkward questions he posed.

These questions remain: Do we have to prove God's existence? Can God intervene in answer to our prayers? Is there an evil force battling with God with mankind as its plaything? Jocelyn Burnell and many others formed helpful responses to these questions, but I feel that many present Friends haven't faced them still. They prefer to continue "doing good". For these "God or the State?" is a non-question.

But it's not enough. The world continues to be divided by its many religions. Christianity remains equally divided. The growing number of cynics and agnostics are blind to the spiritual power that is experienced by people of all religions. Happily there are many Quakers prepared to witness to our undogmatic experience of spiritual power, but not enough. Quakerism will become a footnote to history unless more Friends witness with the same power that the evangelists displayed a hundred years ago.

² Being Together; Swarthmore Lecture 1994

Your witness will probably take you into the world, but you must remain grounded in meetings for worship. If your children's demand for social lives or your worldly affairs prevent you from worship, do less! If your care for someone who cannot be left prevents you from meeting, claim the support of Friends to come to you. If the demands of your career prevent you from regular worship, negotiate to work part time. If you think you need a high income to maintain your home, your children, your car, move home. Explain to your children why they cannot have what others have: trust them, they will understand. Children need parents of integrity, not affluence. My generation believed that the primary social task was to prevent a third world war. Your generation will have to take our witness for simplicity to its logical limits. The challenge is to do this while using all the amazing technological advances and scientific knowledge we have accumulated in the age of affluence.

Your witness in the world may take any number of forms. Whether you drive a bus or perform in a concert hall, dig drains or care for the elderly, it can all be done to the glory of God. Only take care for the consequences of your work: administration or research can be for good or bad ends; working behind a bar can lead to alcoholism or can help to make someone's holiday memorable; engineers can build bridges or bombs. What you eat, where you work, how far you travel, how you entertain yourself, what style of house you have, all these have consequences for the planet, and for God's creation. Teach your children of these things and be ready to learn as their understandings develop.

Your witness may lead you to join other Friends, either locally or in national and international work, but do not despair if funds are not available to complete your vision of this work. God continues to work through all sorts of people, and your failure may be spark that ignites them. Be alert to enquiries from those you work with as to your motives. Be ready to explain what Quakerism means to you. Your witness may lead you to political action. If this leads you to public office take care always to remain grounded by those that elected you. Maintain a dialogue with them, and, if compromise seems necessary be open with them and clear on what principles you are acting.

You have inherited a Society which is highly respected for work in many social fields but which was often funded by the legacies of Friends who are now gone. Do not be seduced by respect for these Friends. You may find that our buildings and paid staff are redundant. The world wide web may become a better "window" than a house on the High Street. Our witness is in the creation of a loving and worshipping community. God may call us to retreat from the world or be active in it. When we find God's love our imperative is to respond in worship first, and in service if we are called to it.

We cannot know God. We do not need to prove to the world that God exists. We do not need to explain how God works either now or in

biblical times. We may not find the traditional Trinitarian names of God helpful, or they may beautifully describe what we have found. We may find God's love for us through the love of friends and family, or we may find it in any number of ways, as testified to by many witnesses. But when we find it we must respond in worship. This we must do together both in private and publicly. We must only maintain Meeting Houses if they are well used between periods of worship. Even listed buildings can have multiple uses. The messages given by these buildings must be consistent with our witness: user friendly and eco-friendly, welcoming, with up to date notice boards and access to information about what and who we are. But many Friends worship in the premises of other bodies and in private homes, and this may be a better use of the Meeting's resources. But there must be public information and the same attention to how visitors will see us.

Your witness may lead you to work with other Christian communities and with those of other faiths. The divisions between Christians is a sin acknowledged by most churches and many will be willing to seek ways of healing these rifts. Learn what Friends before you have contributed to this. Above all accept that all the present Christian communities – including Britain Yearly Meeting – are human institutions and it may be God's will that they should allow the Holy Spirit to work in new ways – as indeed Friends do in other Yearly Meetings. It continues to be Friends witness that The Church is the invisible community of all those who know God, in whatever form. In your dialogue with those of other faiths be strong in your own experience. Our greatest gift to this invisible community is that we do not insist on outward forms as marks of membership. Christ has led us to this knowledge, but many who know they are members of the invisible community have come to this through other paths and we can celebrate with them.

As a young man I felt God's hand in mine, and was confident he would show me what work I should do to put the world right. I taught in suburban secondary schools for twenty years and, I suppose, did some good for some children. I left confident that God did not want to break me on that anvil, and entered the adult world of co-operative development. I practised co-operation for a while then found work teaching these ideas to others. I marched to oppose apartheid, and cruise missiles. I served my Monthly Meeting as best I could. The world was not put right but my efforts did not make it worse. I discovered who I am and what prayer is, and what love is. I would not ask for more than this from any Friend.

At the end of the eighteenth century a Penzance Quaker surgeon, John Tonkin³, adopted three young girls suddenly orphaned by their parents' fever. One of these, Grace, came to regard him as her father and, when she married he paid for her first son Humphrey Davey to attend the local grammar school and then to Truro. Later, after Humphrey's

³ Richard Holmes; The Age of Wonder 2008

father's death he paid for him to be apprenticed to the leading apothecary in Penzance and continued to encourage his researches. John died unknown outside his Meeting. Humphrey Davey is known throughout the world of science. Which of us can know what small acts of philanthropy can have the greatest effect? John, I am sure, did not ask why God guided him to this work and we too need not ask.

My wife and I have four children, one of whom is a Friend, and eight grandchildren, one of whom, so far, is an adult Friend. They have grown up in a very different Society from mine, and a different world. I rejoice in their commitment and know that it is shared by many others. I have no doubt whatsoever that The Spirit is at work through all of them. The clay with which I have worked all my life will be thrown back into the mill and reworked by them, and then again. None of us can know its final form.