

The Future of the Religious Society of Friends in Britain

Introduction

I am glad of the current existence of the Religious Society of Friends in Britain. Desiring the Society's continued existence, I sought membership two years ago. Now I am asked: 'what future?' Presented with this question my initial response was much as it would be if you gave me a block of wood and a chisel and requested a statue. I am no sculptor! I know the potential is there, but what will the exact form be? What is to guide the decisive cutting and shaping needed? But we Quakers do not like to be unthinking sheep. Having committed myself to being part of this future, George Fox's challenge stands: "What canst thou say?" ^[1]

Starting from my experience, I will set the grounds for my hope that the Religious Society of Friends in Britain is sustainable and will indeed have a healthy future. Our actions now are shaping that future. To me it seems critical that we share our understanding of ministry and testimony and offer a welcoming open door to those interested in deeper involvement in the Society. I will then turn to the question of why I hope for a future of the Religious Society of Friends in Britain at all, focusing on the Quaker concept and practice of testimony.

The joy of service

My experience is predominantly of the grassroots, local and area meeting level of the Society. We pride ourselves on being a 'do-it-ourselves' community, a priesthood of all believers. Everyone has something to contribute and everyone shares, as much as they are able, the responsibility for the right ordering of the spiritual, pastoral and mundane life of our Meetings and the Society as a whole. There is great value in this: as individuals, if we see ourselves as having something to give, then we are indeed rich. The Society's vitality stems from the talents, experience and questions of its many members and

attenders.

However this 'do-it-ourselves' ethos can be a heavy burden. It is with sorrow that I have witnessed one Friend after another work too hard, burn out, or diligently carry on serving for months or even years after asking to be released because no-one else has been found to take their place. This cannot but have a toll on the individual and it doesn't benefit the Meeting they serve. To give a concrete example, over £148,000 was defrauded from North Somerset & Wiltshire Monthly Meeting in the period 2002-4 by a treasurer who, experiencing financial difficulties himself, had previously been asked to be released from service^[2]. Admittedly, this is an extreme example. Nevertheless, I could readily forgive an attender looking on who thinks: 'if this is where membership leads, I'll hold off'.

The background to this malaise has been gone over many times by commentators better qualified than I: We are a nation of time poor people, juggling work and caring responsibilities, pressured to spend any leisure time actively consuming. We are already overstretched by commitments to other worthy causes. 'Birthright' friends, steeped in Quaker practices from cradle to grave with support from extended Quaker families are a treasured rarity. Young people actively involved in the Society are scarcer than we might like . . . Many Meetings are actively developing innovative solutions, pruning obsolete jobs and finding new ways to share responsibility for the essentials. Understanding the background and experimenting with new ways forward are both needful, but here I would like to step-back and consider whether the underlying principle of service will survive into the future.

Our do-it-ourselves ethos is one of the fundamental characteristics of the Religious Society of Friends and too valuable to be abandoned. My life would be poorer without the service I offer my Meeting, and I believe that my Meeting and the wider community would also be poorer. Many other Friends could sincerely say the same, and yet it can seem almost

taboo to speak of the joys of service. To me this is critical. If we can know and communicate this joy, then others will recognise the truth of it and be drawn to it, just as Robert Barclay encountering Quakers "felt a secret power among them, which touched my heart" and hungered "more and more after the increase of this power and life"^[3]. If we can offer this, then the Religious Society of Friends in Britain will have a strong future, bearing, to quote Barclay again, "the natural fruit of this good root"^[4].

But we cannot take it for granted that this will happen. In darker hours it appears that the prevailing wisdom of the age is that it is irresponsible to act for any reason other than for direct benefit to oneself; that it is foolish to make oneself vulnerable by giving of oneself. I find that this pernicious, creeping mindset lurks ready to strike the moment the going gets tough, and serving in the Religious Society of Friends can undoubtedly be tough. But I do not believe that it is the natural or inevitable mindset of the human animal. Whenever I am offered a glimpse of a selflessness or vocation, my heart goes out to it, seizes it, hungers for more. I do not think this is an unusual response.

We are advised: "do not be afraid to say what you have found and what you value"^[5]. I have found that if something asked of me is ministry, then I am given the strength to do it. We think of fruit as being produced by the plant that bears it, but it is equally a product of the water that plant takes in. The peace, the relief, the joy that accompanied this realisation as I drank in one Meeting for Worship! I did not need to give up or neglect any of the duties I had committed myself; I was not on a slippery slope to resentment and exhaustion: if I allow it, make space for it, then strength is given. Friends often speak of spoken ministry as something that is given to them, their role being that of conduit. The same can be true of practical service performed as ministry.

I do not mean this as a criticism or slight on the spiritual resources of those who feel weary and heavy laden, those who are not able to serve at the moment, or those whose service

lies elsewhere. There are of course limits to what an individual can do without damaging themselves or their loved ones. But my vision for the future of the Society is nevertheless of a do-it-ourselves community. If we can speak honestly of serving our Meetings - of being quite literally the life and soul of our Society - as a sacred experience of the fullness of life, this will open the way to others. Britain is full of people disillusioned with the consumer society's stock answers - 'make more money', 'buy more'; people seeking to lead a worthwhile life; seeking authentic happiness and community. A fair portion of those attending Quaker Meetings are surely among this number. Rather than the harvest being ready and the workers few, the potential workers are many (well, sufficient), but we have to point out the waiting harvest. Think of the next Friend feeling that first prompt towards such service. Think of the encouragement they might draw from knowing that the apparent high cost may be the transforming sacrifice of a germinating seed.

Open doors

I have had in mind so far the demanding tasks fundamental to the functioning of the Society: clerking, eldership, oversight, the stewarding of finance and property, service on central committees. I have shared the grounds of my hope for a healthy future Religious Society of Friends in Britain were these tasks are performed. Nevertheless, it is worth stressing that the indicator of health here is simply that these tasks are performed in healthy service, not that every single Friend be constantly engaged in them. Participants in the Religious Society of Friends range from occasional attenders to 'weighty Friends' via a diverse myriad of in-betweens. This is no failing. We must not allow language to betray us into thinking of the different modes of participation as a ladder to climb where the purpose of it all is to reach the top. As an occasional attender, I found kindness and wisdom among Friends. Even if I had drifted away, never to set foot in a Meeting House again, never to think of myself as a 'Friend' with a capital F, that in itself would be enough for me to desire a future for the Society where others can find the same.

I see the community and work of the Religious Society of Friends, especially our public meetings for worship, as gifts collectively given by all those serving and ministering (in whatever capacity), to all who come into contact with the society. As gifts, these should be freely given, without expectation of payment or reciprocation. This is not to undermine their worth or gloss over the labour that goes in to their creation. It is to offer them untainted and to protect the givers from bitterness.

So, here is the challenge before us: to present a welcoming open door to those who are led to increased participation in the Society without implying this is the one true path and any other invalid. The members and attenders of the Religious Society of Friends in Britain are largely adult converts. The workings of the Society can seem opaque; cordoned off for a holy few. We must trust our practices to stand up to examination and testing. They are strong enough that they are enhanced rather than compromised by new insights and expressions. We must bring them into the open, teach valued Quaker ways without being narrowly prescriptive, pass on traditions as full of living meaning rather than as imposed rules. And we must have faith that Friends, even new-comers, will be able to recognise the worth of Quaker ways, be glad to grow in them and learn to implement them with grace. Can we see our Meetings as living gardens not dusty jigsaw puzzles with missing pieces? We have to prepare the ground to receive the seeds of ministry and service; care for growing plants; provide space for them to flourish. Harder still we have to leave the door unlocked so that people can lay down responsibilities as naturally as they take them up, and bless with good grace those whose spiritual journey takes them through the Society and then on. We do not feel that we have failed or been insulted when the swallows leave each autumn.

Bearing fruit

I started this essay with the image of sculpting the Society's future. I now suggest that it is more apt to think of the Society as a living tree rather than a dead block of wood. Or better

yet as a plant genus, identifiable even as its individual members flourish and compost. A tree is known by its fruit, fruit it produces without striving, it can do no other. Now the future seems laughably clear! Plants of the genus Quaker will to grow and die, and they will be known by their fruit. This fruit is the worship, community and work of the Society: meetings for worship where seekers may find water to quench their thirst; friendships that nourish our community; the testimonies that stubbornly insist on a better society. The future of the Religious Society of Friends in Britain will be to continue to produce and give freely of this fruit.

It will be clear by now that I do not think the Religious Society of Friends in Britain is fated to crumble under the weight of its internal bureaucracy or decline into obscurity due to falling numbers. But neither do I envisage exponential growth towards universal Quakerism. My hope is for a fully functioning future Society taking its place alongside other faiths and those of no particular religious allegiance. This begs the questions: why hope for this? Do we perpetuate all these jobs and committees and practices just for the sake of it? Merely because it is pleasant or comforting to belong to a 'peculiar people'? My answer: emphatically no! The Society has something valuable to contribute to those who come into contact with it and to the wider society it exists within; something hungered after that humanity would be impoverished without. Central to this 'something' is the Quaker concept and experience of testimony.

Here I am indebted to Jonathan Dale for his lucid explanation of testimony at the QPSW spring conference in 2008^[6]. Testimony goes deeper than intellectually assenting to particular values or morals. By describing a course of action as testimony, early Friends were indicating that they had found that to act otherwise would be to erect a barrier between themselves and God, hence the powerful conviction that testimonies could not be compromised. Remarkably, this experience rings true today, even for those of us who's concept of God (if we have one at all) is very different from the understanding we assume

early Friends held. Thus in testimony, the Religious Society of Friends offers integrity: a way of life that, although profoundly challenging, does no violence to our essential wholeness. Furthermore, it offers a community where this is understood and cherished rather than dismissed as madness.

The Religious Society of Friends exudes this offer, even in actions not consciously labeled as testimony. I would like to give one personal example: I once attended a Quaker workshop in which we were asked why we came to Meeting for Worship. It is perhaps symptomatic of the spirit of the age that I, and many others present, answered in terms of what we get out of Meeting for Worship, how it benefits and enriches us as individuals: quiet refreshment, friendship and so on. When an elderly Friend answered immediately, as if it was the obvious answer, "to come in to the presence of God" I was tempted to dismiss this as overly simplistic and not much use in a group where many of us aren't really sure what we mean by 'God'. But this was from a Friend dear to my heart, so I did not dismiss her answer out of hand. Thus I found a door opened to a world view where benefit to self is not the absolute value against which everything else must be justified.

The presence of God is not always an easy place to be. This is the light that "shows us our darkness"^[7]: here our indulgent fripperies are at best irrelevant, there is no space for selfishness, and what is asked of us may not be reasonable. But here there is also love and peace, and part of us responds 'this is it', this is what existence is about. I am grateful to Friends who have not shied away from this, whose example encourages me to not to dismiss such experience as fanciful or untenable. We must continue to owe this and speak to it so that others may be similarly encouraged.

Climate change is the defining challenge of our age. It is shaking people's understanding of the world and their place in it. People are looking for ways to make sense of life. The Religious Society of Friends offers testimony, if not as a way of making sense of life, at

least of a method of finding a way through. We can invite people to recognise themselves as more than consumers whose only imperative is to seek the easiest route for themselves. There will be those who welcome this and whose lives are richer for it.

Madeline Bunting, writing in the Guardian recently, describes how in carbon cutting she has found not a hair shirt, but rather "a proposition of how to live which is compelling"; delivery from apathy; and "a more honest life"^[8]. To me Bunting's article reads as an account of testimony, although as far as I know it was not intended as such. There is, perhaps more than ever before, a hungry audience of people seeking just this sort of honest life who might welcome and draw strength from the Quaker concept of testimony.

And what of my claim that the Religious Society of Friends has something to contribute to wider Society, even those who never have direct contact with it? A comprehensive account would take far more space than is available to me here. Just flicking through the 2009 Outreach Issue of *the Friend* provides a wealth of examples: the Ecumenical Accompaniers Programme for Palestine/Israel, Circles UK, Britain Yearly Meeting's decision to recognise same sex marriages, the use of restorative justice in Schools, and the Living Witness Project^[9]. All these have are a clearly recognisable tangible benefit to society as a whole. Both within and beyond these named initiatives we find the Quaker conviction that there is good to be found even in "desolate places in the earth"^[10] and see the transforming results of "quiet processes and small circles"^[11].

Conclusion

I have argued that the Religious Society of Friends in Britain will continue to grow organically, producing fruit that enriches both its members and attenders and society as a whole. This is not to say there is no place for sculptors; for prophets and vision, for asking difficult questions, for change. These are all vital to the life of the Society. Nevertheless I find that, by relieving us of the pressure of absolute creative responsibility, this organic

metaphor frees us to humbly get on with being the future. We have, in our experiences of service, ministry and testimony, reliable guides to lead us forwards. Can we find meaningful ways to share this with those who are seeking?

References

- [1] Margaret Fell quoting George Fox, in: *Quaker Faith & Practice: The book of Christian discipline of the Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain*, 3rd ed. London: The Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain, 1994, para. 19.07.
- [2] Welton, J. *A Vulnerable Victim? A report for North Somerset and Wiltshire Monthly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends*. London: Quaker Stewardship Committee, 2006, pp. 5, 11.
- [3] Robert Barclay, in: *Quaker Faith & Practice: The book of Christian discipline of the Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain*, 3rd ed. London: The Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain, 1994, para. 19.21.
- [4] As [3]
- [5] *Quaker Faith & Practice: The book of Christian discipline of the Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain*, 3rd ed. London: The Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain, 1994, para. 1.02.5.
- [6] Dale, J., speaking at: *QPSW Spring Conference: Peace Justice and the Environment*, Swanwick 28-30 March 2008.
- [7] *Quaker Faith & Practice: The book of Christian discipline of the Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain*, 3rd ed. London: The Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain, 1994, para. 1.02.1.
- [8] Bunting, M. "My battle to cut carbon: a baffling, frustrating path to a more honest life." *The Guardian*, 7 Sept 2009. Available: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/cif-green/2009/sep/06/carbon-footprint-aga-energy-saving> [Accessed 21 Nov 2009]
- [9] *The Friend*, Vol 167 No 40. London: The Friend, 2009
- [10] James Naylor, 1660, in: *Quaker Faith & Practice: The book of Christian discipline of the Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain*, 3rd ed. London: The Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain, 1994, para. 19.12
- [11] Rufus Jones, 1937, in: *Quaker Faith & Practice: The book of Christian discipline of the Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain*, 3rd ed. London: The Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain, 1994, para. 24.56.

