

THE FRIENDS QUARTERLY 2009 PRIZE ESSAY COMPETITION

"The future of the Religious Society of Friends in Britain"

"TO CONFORM OR NOT TO CONFORM?"

Early Friends attached primacy to the leadings of the Spirit. If the Spirit led them to challenge the status quo, the accepted norms of the time, then they had no compunction in refusing to conform to the world – they had a higher loyalty. This cost them dear: imprisonment, loss of goods, public humiliation, death even. But such was the power of their leadings from the Spirit they felt liberated from the need to conform to the world. They refused to do 'hat honour', to swear oaths, to use titles, to observe "times & seasons', to use the conventional terms for the days of the week and the months of the year, to fight and they affirmed that marriage was the work of the Lord, not the state. These and other witnesses brought them into conflict with the powers that be but their loyalty was to the Truth which was from God. This was not just a matter of individual conscience, it became a matter of corporate conviction discerned in worshipful waiting on the leading of the Spirit

Quaker history is rich with examples of individual testimony against the accepted norms and practices of the time. Quaker men and women had a vision which empowered them to challenge the ways of the world. Often witness started with an individual eg a John Woolman, an Elizabeth Fry but with time and discernment that personal witness grew into corporate concern and action. Quakers as a body became identified as a people who would not conform to the world if that involved compromising the leadings of the Spirit. They did not settle for a quiet life, they truly did "live adventurously" , they were a "peculiar people", and they were willing to pay the price for being such and it gave them a distinctive identity.

So how do we measure up to that standard? When I served on Meeting for Sufferings I was always intrigued by the 'Court Register'. Every now and then a minute would be received from a Meeting with news of a Friend who was taken to law and fined or imprisoned for an act of witness. If Meeting for Sufferings agreed their names were then entered into the Court Register.

Although we never saw that register its very name represented for me a precious link with our past, it reminded me of the reason for the title of the body I was myself sitting on, Meeting for Sufferings. But I think, without exception, during my period of service, the witness which had brought those Friends we named into conflict with the law was the Peace Testimony in one form or another.

So are there no other aspects of modern life which now lead us to challenge the ways of the world, and if necessary make a stand against the conventions of the world or the law itself and have our names entered in the register? To any outsider looking in, apart from peace - and that now primarily through the witness of individual Friends - we seem to be willing to conform to the ways of the contemporary world. Our ways of working with children, with employees, our buildings, our corporate governance are now all circumscribed by government legislation, rules & regulations. We not only abide by them but through our central structures we even became active agents in the implementation and administration of the laws of the land. This has had the unfortunate effect of allowing - perhaps even encouraging! - those Friends with obsessive tendencies towards caution and control to pursue their obsessions, to seek out evidence of danger and non-compliance with the law. We are not just conforming to the world, in so many ways we have become an integral part of it!

So much of this sort of legislation seems to have been introduced with the purpose of reducing - even seeking to eliminate - risk. Yes we must have a proper care for the welfare of children and vulnerable adults and take sensible precautions in our buildings but this can be so easily taken to excess. A culture has grown up in which it is only too easy for Friends even to lose all sense of proportion. Our own internal processes of discernment and judgement have to be sacrificed to the latest prescribed screening procedures. Our central structures become an implementing arm of central government. We have undoubtedly lost Friends from Quaker service with children, as Trustees because some Friends are not prepared to be a party to

procedures which according to their consciences conflict with established Quaker procedures for the proper discernment of gifts and nomination.

Would Jesus, George Fox or so many others have changed history if they had first had to fill out their risk assessments sheets! Should we really have to check our instincts for compassion against the small print of our insurance policies? It happens! Should the serving of Area Meeting tea be subject to formal health & hygiene training, with certificates on the wall? Do we need formal policies for lone workers in our Meeting Houses? These and other examples are an indicator of the direction in which we have been moving. May be, individually, good cases can be made for specific interventions, and in a media obsessed age its not surprising that politicians intervene when cases of abuse and accident lead the press and popular opinion to demand new controls to 'stop it happening again'!. Shouldn't we be standing against that populist tide? Quakers in the past were quite clear where to draw the line between the State and the Spirit and they had no doubt, if there were a conflict between the two, which had the higher claim.

So can we still, with integrity, claim that the primary reference in our corporate life is the leading of the Spirit as discerned in worship and waiting? Or have we gone along with the prevailing mood of the times seeking to ensure that we comply fully with the latest legislation from the executive? Our history of course points us to the former, the supremacy of the Spirit's leading. But our practice suggests we have developed strong 'conformist tendencies'! And at times we seem positively zealous to ensure that we operate to the very last dot & comma of the legislation. The danger in all this is that by applying our brains & managerial skills to these issues we may have closed our hearts to the voice of common sense, sound discernment and the guidance of the Spirit.

As employers, owners of property, holders of investment funds we are told we must use what is often expensive professional advice to keep us on the right side of the law. Real choices have to be made and this can mean heart breaking decisions about whether we fund a piece of Quaker work or buying

in specified professional services. How does all this square with the seven objects for Area Meetings as now agreed in the model Charity Commission registration Governing Document and which forms the standard for those Area Meetings in the first wave of formal registration? In summary these are

- (1) (to)strengthen the life and witness of Quaker meetings
- (2) spreading the message of Quakers and developing the thought and practice of the Religious Society
- (3) undertaking Quaker service for the relief of suffering at home and abroad
- (4) funding the concerns that Quaker meetings in the area of Area Meeting or beyond have adopted or agreed to support
- (5) providing for the pastoral care of individual members and attenders including assistance to those in need and for education
- (6) maintaining and developing Quaker Meeting houses as places for public worship from which to carry our witness into the world
- (7) administering and maintaining the organisation of Area Meeting and contributing to the support of Britain Yearly Meeting.

Does the welter of legislation and control help us pursue those charitable objects? Or have we been dangerously deflected from those central purposes and become complicit in society's attempts to eliminate risk and danger from modern life. Is it unrealistic to hope for some indication that across the board, not just in relation to peace, but in relation to our other testimonies to simplicity, equality and truth, we are still committed to being Spirit led and ready, when we discern aright, to challenge the world, to stand for Truth, to be a peculiar people. And to do this not just in order to **be** peculiar and non-conformist but because we have been led to the place where Truth **requires** us to challenge the world.

The decision of Britain Yearly Meeting at York this year to apply our Testimony to equality to same sex marriage may prove a turning point – and we were powerfully reminded just how many years that particular piece of discernment had taken. Its eventual significance may lie as much in

demonstrating to others - and to ourselves - that we are still willing, corporately, to make an unpopular stand against 'the world', as in the specific witness we want to make to equality in marriage - important though the latter is. Perhaps BYMG at York 2009, and what flows from it, might empower us to sit a little more lightly to the world of safety, security and risk minimisation which has enveloped us, and free us again to give primacy to the leadings of the Spirit. That served us well in our formative years, it gave us a vision to pursue, an identity and distinctiveness.

Let us dare to think, and hope, that our exercise at York could be the start of a rediscovered willingness to challenge the ways of the world wherever they conflict with our discernment of the leadings of the Spirit. Our historic peace witness is a justifiable cause for pride but if we listen to the promptings of Love & Truth in our hearts, if we have the courage not to conform to the world, then maybe Meeting for Sufferings will have cause to make some new, and different, entries in that Court Register!

Word count : 1699

(didn't have time to make it 1652!)

