

The Future of the Religious Society of Friends in Britain

A PERSONAL STATEMENT

Quakerism is the most precious gift that I have been given.

THE STARTING POINT

Why a Future for Quakerism in Britain is important.

I care passionately about Quakerism and am deeply concerned that it is dying out if present trends are allowed to continue and that is the background to all that I have to say in this essay. I do not think it is too late but that we are approaching the point of no return more quickly than we think.

In his delightful book 'Brief Lives' John Aubrey writes that Sir William Davenant (1601 – 1668) confessed to him that *his private opinion was that religion, at last, e.g. a hundred years hence, would come to some Settlement, and that in a kind of ingeniose Quakerisme*. Davenant was appointed the second Poet Laureate in 1637 on the death of Ben Johnson. He was knighted in 1643 and the quote above must have been made fairly late in his life.

Now I happen to think that there is some wisdom in what Davenant said, not because I expect Quakerism to become the predominant Christian denomination but because it is such a straightforward approach to religion and, more importantly, spirituality. It reduces the religious aspects to a sensible and necessary minimum while expecting each Friend to have a personal responsibility for his or her own spiritual life and experience of whatever each calls God. It is worth noting that even the non-theists can apply the same approach to their spiritual life even if the concept of God is alien to them, or so I believe as someone who is not a non-theist.

Also Quakerism has very rounded and down to earth attitudes to social matters as expressed in our testimonies, so that we have moved far from the days when we were puritanical in our approach to the arts in general as well as many other prejudices about sex, homosexuality, peace and so forth. We are now among the most liberal of Christians and I am proud of that, not for its own sake but because I believe that it not only expresses our testimonies but reflects what Jesus was trying to lead us towards, namely a loving, peaceful and compassionate world.

However, Quakerism is in decline and so the first question is whether it is worth saving at all, which, if a depressing prospect, is one that is worth addressing.

WHY BOTHER? LET QUAKERISM DIE – IT HAS HAD ITS DAY NOW

When Quakerism came into being there were many social evils and bad societal habits that Fox and others struggled to address. Out of these efforts emerged our Testimonies, especially that about peace. Today many of those concerns have been dealt with or have faded into insignificance. There is legislation about equality; Schools, colleges and professions are open to all; slavery is officially, if not in reality, banned; Health and Safety has made workplaces safer; and so on. But there are still many aspects of life today where Quakers have something incredibly valuable to say and if these things are said by us as a vibrant and thriving Society then the world will be more inclined to listen. Day by day we are becoming less able to speak about what we believe with any authority.

This might suggest that it is all about numbers but I cannot accept that. Fox said there is a great cloud to be gathered in and I think that this is still true. I think there are a great number of 'natural' Quakers out there in the world.

I care not a jot whether anyone in Britain becomes a Quaker or not. I mind desperately if there is one person in Britain who does not know about Quakers, what they stand for and why.

That is our challenge. And if more and more people discover what Quakers are about then the numbers will, I am sure, come back to the Society. Maybe we will never again have one in every hundred of the population as members as was once the case, but there would be far more than at present. Then what we have to say would be heard more clearly.

Lastly, what we have to say about each of our Testimonies, is as vital today as ever. This is for three reasons. One is that Society, if not broken as the politicians say, is in a sorry state in many ways. The second is that our testimonies present a consistent approach to life that relies on having an inbuilt consistency to them. The third is that we are still trying to solve the world's problems by war and aggression when we must realise by now that this never, ever works.

WHY IS QUAKERISM IMPORTANT TODAY – AND WORTH SAVING ?

In this section I am aware that what follows may read like a text book, but in stating what I understand to be the basic Quaker tenets I am only setting down what I have found to be so useful for me personally.

For me there are several aspects of Quakerism that are not only attractive but essential. Firstly there is the very nature of Quakerism. Every aspect of being a Quaker is based on personal experience and interpretation and not on any form of

external authority. Yet there is an amazing degree of unity among Friends about all that matters to them in the way we live their lives so that it is possible to sit in meeting for worship knowing that whatever any individual thinks about any aspect of belief there will be unity about how we need to approach life in this world as expressed in our testimonies.

Then each individual must work out for him or herself what they know of God so that Quakerism is experiential. When I first realised that this is what it meant to be a Friend I was amazed and, I confess, a little troubled. This was because I wondered what would happen if I never had a meaningful experience of God. But whether that comes as a 'road to Damascus' experience or through a series of smaller moments it will happen if an individual allows it to. At any rate that is what I found.

George Gorman's phrase 'the amazing fact of Quaker worship' resonates with me for I have always found the silence of a meeting to be immensely powerful, on some occasions more than others, but always worth the effort. I miss meeting for worship on Sunday on the occasions when I cannot attend more than I can say and after a childhood spent in some rather lifeless free church services I find the spontaneity of a Quaker meeting uplifting.

It would be difficult now to belong to a church that was born out of doctrinal differences with another church, or one where there was a heavy reliance on the sort of unity imposed by words such as a creed. In spiritual matters unity is best left undefined as far as possible. I say this in the knowledge that we have our own boundaries and our own forms of words. However, they are not so proscriptive as to cause too much difficulty and, while we use words, there is always going to be a minimum of statement.

I am very pleased and thankful that Quakers do a great deal for peace, for the future of the planet, for social causes such as prisons and the justice system, mediation and the like, equality, fair and honest dealing, and so on. As a group we could hardly be faulted for all that.

Another advantage of Quakerism is that I think it is inconceivable that we could be any trouble with fundamentalism that would be in any way damaging as it can be in other areas of life. The very absence of credal statements, lack of reliance on books that are 'true' or obedience to a leader ensures that fundamentalism cannot, almost by definition, arise. Of course there are many among us who would wish us to adhere more closely to the Quakerism of Fox's time, others who would have us all universalists and yet more Friends who would wish us all to be non-theists. But we are evolving ways of rubbing along together which can only be good in my view. It is the way in which individual Friends lead their lives as a result of their faith that matters more than the beliefs per se.

So Quakerism has always meant a great deal to me because it places the responsibility for my spiritual life firmly where it should belong – on me. Friends recognise that each of us is on a journey and some may be ahead of us, some not reached the point that we have, and so on. This leads me to consider what it is about Quakerism that is so difficult to communicate and share.

WHY IS QUAKERISM SO HARD TO PUT ACROSS TO OTHERS

Many people approach religion and spirituality through the conventional teachings of the Christian churches where what is being offered is a destination and not a journey. Usually it is very hard to get behind this mindset because most people want to be told what to think and are deterred by the thought that it might be up to them what they believe and what it is that they call God and so on. This is the hardest of the barriers to overcome.

But there are other barriers and one of these is the comparative rarity of members of local meetings arranging and running activities in their community where they become known collectively as Quakers. In my area meeting no single meeting does a regular weekly event (although they do let the meeting houses to pay for as much of the running costs as possible).

In many meetings now there is no class for children. There are few families with children. In my area meeting there is one meeting with a regular class for children and none in the other six local meetings. Sadly these facts are not untypical.

Young Friends seem to be a separate organisation and do not seem to feed members into the Society when they are too old for Young Friends.

We are not good enough at using the internet and other electronic means of communication and this may be partly why we do not attract younger people to the Society.

Then there are a whole host of details that prevent people being able to contact us. My meeting has no contact detail of any sort on our notice board in the garden nor does it say when meeting is held. On entering a visitor would find very little that we are doing as a meeting by way of community work of any sort (as has already been said) although we do have Oversight Groups and a monthly discussion or book group. But it is not enough and it is not attractive to a curious visitor in most cases. It shows nothing of how we live out our testimonies.

In my view all these issues, and many others, will have to be addressed by local meetings if we are to survive as a national Society with a voice in the world.

Here it is important to say that this essay will discuss what I believe 'needs to happen' – not, notice, 'what needs to be done'. The 'needs to be done' scenario could be said to imply the sort of leadership that the Society cannot, by definition, embrace. On the other hand the 'needs to happen' puts the responsibility on Quakers collectively to determine their own salvation through the traditional systems of concern and discernment.

WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN:

Local Meetings

'Our lettings income has fallen off this year and we may not cover our outgoings.'

Statement by a Treasurer at a local meeting

It is hard to know where to begin. For change to happen it must be seen as necessary by most Friends and this, in Quaker tradition should start in the local meetings. So it is perhaps best to start with there and try to determine what we mean by a healthy, vibrant and confident meeting. After all this is where most of us spend a great deal of our Quaker time and energy and is where confidence and surely is where growth must start.

Meeting for Worship is one of the defining and individual gifts that Quakers have to offer. I have noticed that the best meetings are those which are fed, one way or another, by spiritual nurture, by fellowship among Friends and others attending, by shared experiences and activities between meetings, by the presence of children and young people and by a degree of continuity of regular attendance.

This is a long way from some meetings where Friends are content only to meet once a week and where there is no other activity between meetings and certainly no contact, as Quakers, with the outside world. A visitor would realise that when the Clerk gives out the notices there was nothing else other than worship and business meetings happening which would not attract many visitors to want to join in.

So:

- It would be wonderful if you could expect to find in every meeting a quality of worship that was gathered and where the quality of the meeting was apparent through the confidence and depth of the silence and ministry.
- It would be wonderful if you could expect to find every meeting having such activities as discussion groups, book groups, Experiments in the Light and the like happening on a regular basis.
- It would be wonderful if you could expect every meeting to have at least one activity that was designed to attract and be of service or use to local people other than just letting rooms in the meeting house and in which Friends were involved as helpers, organisers or whatever so that they were known to be Quakers.
- It would be wonderful if you could expect every meeting to hold Away Days or Weekends regularly which would have provision for children and for Quakers who are married to non-Friends. Also that every meeting would send more of their number away to Quaker courses, retreats etc.
- It would be wonderful if you could expect every meeting to have a thriving children's class with well prepared and committed Friends running their activities.
- It would be wonderful if you could expect every meeting to have an attractive meeting house with a board outside with times of meeting for worship, a contact of some sort (address, telephone or website) and, inside, an up to date notice board with evidence of events and initiatives that the meeting are undertaking.
- It would be wonderful if you could expect every meeting to be paying its way by contributions from Friends and Attenders that would cover the running costs of the meeting house, the amount required by area meeting and by British Yearly Meeting (BYM). Then any monies received from lettings and the like could be devoted to Quaker causes, locally, nationally and internationally.

If I was to score my own meeting, seen by most Friends in area meeting as being a 'good' meeting, out of ten for each of these seven aspects of meeting life we would score 6, 5, 0, 6, 0, 3, 1. This produces a total of 21 out of 70 and is, I suspect, about average, with some notable exceptions. This is a crude way of measuring a meeting, I know, but it does illustrate something of the difficulties facing Friends today. Also it implies a meeting being of a sufficient size to enable all

the things listed to happen. At present there are many meetings who would struggle to achieve some, let alone all, of these aspects of a meeting's life.

Interestingly nothing has been said yet specifically about spirituality. This is partly because I think that when Quakers do things and do them well then the spiritual content and context can almost be taken for granted. Like all human beings we enjoy success. Look at the very evident joy when Bury St Edmunds meeting completed their building works and the effect that seems to have had on the meeting. Look at the confidence and joy that so many of us felt when the decision was taken at BYM about same sex marriages. So much of the worry and angst in Quakerism is because we are not doing very well in many circumstances – with, again, some notable exceptions. There seems to be a lack of confidence and joy among Friends

Area Meetings

'As a Trustee you will have to be free for meetings during weekdays and we like to have lunch together afterwards.'

Heard at an area meeting where the expectations of new Trustees were being explained.

There seem to be three problems with area meetings at present. These are not applicable to all area meetings but do seem to apply to many such.

Many area meetings are not all happy about having Trustees seeming to be able to over-ride the wishes of the meeting. This leads to mistrust and is born of a misunderstanding of the Trustees role. They are responsible for ensuring that area meeting keeps within the law and the requirements of the Charity Commissioners. In my observation nearly every law and requirement of the Charity Commissioners is designed to ensure good management of the charity and if this leads to Friends being expected to change some of their ways then it is probable that they needed to change anyway.

Then there are complaints that area meetings are boring and too long. This is because often all they have to consider that is of significance is property and finance. Friends are like most other people in that on their own these matters are not very exciting. But if local meetings were really vibrant things would be different. There would be a reason for needing to think about property and finance.

The third aspect of area meetings that is difficult in many places is the age profile which, in many cases, is far too old. Inevitably growth in membership and attendance among younger people will address this issue. That is all there is to say about this and it justifies all talk of growth and outreach.

Money

'Quakers do not like talking about money'

Tony Stoller at a Seminar about ethical investment at the JRCT

It is a simple and depressing fact that Friends do not pay enough to British Yearly Meeting (BYM) to cover the running costs of the Society's central work even when the work is what most Quakers want to have done on their behalf. Furthermore there seems to be an attitude abroad that these things will go on being done in the name of Quakers even if we do not adequately support B Y M financially. Currently we survive on legacies and this will prove to be a dying source of money. Until very recently this situation did not seem to bother Friends much, except for a few who could see all too clearly what was going on. I, like many other Christians, call the responsibility to fund our core work 'stewardship'. This is completely different to 'fund raising' which implies an element of choice about an individuals need to contribute and is a term better applied to a one-off appeal for something special like an extension to a meeting house. Friends call stewardship fundraising which suggests there is some choice as to whether it is necessary.

Of course Friends donate, doubtless generously, to other very worthy causes. As a Quaker of over 50 years I now find it essential to support Quakerism properly and try to do so to the best of my ability. Other causes, in my case, have to take second place.

It is often said that Fox disapproved of tithing but I doubt that statement represents Fox's real attitude because I suspect he objected to tithes going to a church of which he did not want to be a member. So tithing or not, and I am not advocating tithing, he would have expected Friends to be responsible about their commitment to the Society. That is one of the things we are told is expected of us when we are seek membership of the Society

Many meetings rejoice when their lettings income pays their outgoings on the property and covers some of the money they are asked to give to area meeting. This is unhealthy for several reasons. First of all it seems to happen when the only use Friends have for their meeting house is to meet on Sunday and for the occasional business meeting. That does not describe the sort of meeting to which I wish to belong for how can such Friends ever engage with the community around them on that basis.

Secondly, it betokens a sad attitude to supporting the Society. We have simple buildings and do not have to pay for ministers or pastors and their manses so we should be able to pay for the running costs of our meeting houses. Sadly I know of one meeting in my area where less than half of the members contribute anything at all. Now there will always be those who cannot afford very much, but there are plenty of us who could contribute more – I am sure of that.

Then there is the Quaker dependence on grants from the chocolate family trusts and other historic sources of funds. I think it is wrong for these trusts to be funding people to do things that, again, should be paid for as we go along. Most Friends will have heard complaints about the cost of weekends at places like Woodbrooke when they are very reasonable indeed compared to similar events in the real world. Three Quaker centres (Woodbrooke, Charney Manor and Swarthmore Hall) have recently undertaken major changes or additions and thankfully they decided to do them well. The results have been very encouraging and Friends enjoy using them. It proves the value of well managed change and spending enough, but not too much, on such developments.

There is a frightening culture of poverty. It is all too easy to equate simplicity with cheapness. Early Friends understood what simplicity meant. They did things well and they did them to last. They were confident of the need to build meeting houses properly and to furnish them well. Too often meeting houses do not express the feeling that someone cares about them. Simplicity can cost more in the short term but when approached in the right spirit will be very economical in the long run.

The Bishop of Southwark in 'Thought for the Day' on Radio 4 recently talked about the spiritual aspect of money. Now there will be those who would say that money is the root of all evil and cannot ever have a spiritual character. But even if that is true I think that the absence of money can have a very dispiriting effect and this is about to become a real issue for Friends. The Bishop said that if you want to know what anyone really values look at their bank statements. This is an interesting suggestion and has a great deal of truth in it.

Outreach

'Becoming a Quaker was like coming home – but why do you make yourselves so hard to find?'

Heard at Yearly Meeting in Friends House some years ago

Happily there is a growing awareness that outreach is important, so that all those who are 'natural' Quakers can be given the chance of discovering us. There is a danger that some may see Quaker Quest as being the saving initiative for our Society but that would be very dangerous. If you ask Friends House staff concerned with outreach they will say that only about 20 to 25% of new members come from Quaker Quest and others will by word of mouth, adverts and so forth.

So, while outreach is undoubtedly the responsibility of each individual Friend it will be much enhanced by what meetings do together as Friends in their own communities. The benefit of this sort of activity is that it can bind a meeting together through shared effort and commitment.

Real growth will only come about as our meetings become more confident, involved and joyful. It is as simple as that.

Children and Young People

Our Society faces the same challenge as many other churches in that we find it hard to keep contact with the young people as they grow up. It is true that Young Friends is a flourishing organisation but it seem almost detached from the Society as a whole.

It has been suggested that the new means of communication, facebook, blogging and twitter should be used to keep in touch but that may not be the solution 'per se'. It has been suggested that the time of meeting for worship on a Sunday morning may not suit young people. This raises an interesting point which is how far should we go to accommodate young people by making such adjustments.

All that said there has been some excellent work done about how to engage children and young people and such events as Summer Schools, Junior Yearly Meeting, the Quaker Youth Theatre, the Leaveners and so forth all provide seminal experiences that young people love, but they do not go on into the Society in sufficient numbers. Personally I would not have been in the Society all these years had it not been for these events when I was young and impressionable. And it must be remembered that we are not the only Christian denomination to experience these problems.

CONTRIBUTIONS THAT QUAKERS MAY BE ABLE TO MAKE IN FUTURE

An Approach to God

Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his Letters and Papers from prison says, towards the end of his time before he was hanged the following:

And we cannot be honest unless we recognise that we have to live in the world 'etsi deus non daretur'. And this is just what we do recognise – before God! God himself compels us to recognise it. So our coming of age leads us to a true recognition of our situation before God. God would have us know that we must live as men who manage our lives without him. The God who is with us is the God who forsakes us (Mark 15.34).

It was tempting to edit and omit from this paragraph, but I have not done so because I find the whole paragraph true to what Bonhoeffer was trying to say. It has seemed to me from my first encounters with Quakerism in my teens that one of the attractions was that it is a belief system for grown-ups. The other denominations tend to treat their followers more like children and I think we must move from that to a situation where we are adult in our reliance on God.. This does not mean that all that is in our history is thrown away. My parents are now dead but their influence will be with me to the day I die and I have no wish to change that in any way. Rather I hope to honour them by doing what I think they would have

wanted me to do in any given circumstance. And I cannot see why we cannot treat our history in that way always being careful to see to it that we are not afraid to deal with new social situations in new ways and not try too hard to relate our reaction to some valued old and specific precept. I am sure that Fox and many of his contemporaries would be shocked by some of our attitudes today – same sex marriage, the lack of use of the Bible, our relaxed attitude to sexual relationships and so on. But they would see much more that they would recognise as being in direct inheritance from their insights.

So the first gift or insight that Quakers might present to the world is Bonhoeffer's suggestion that God would have us know that we must manage our lives without him. We already have Friends who are non-theists and I do not know what they would make of this, but I suspect they would welcome Bonhoeffer's idea because I imagine it reflects much of their position. For those of us who do have something that they call God it is equally relevant because it shows a way to approach life and spirituality that is not dependent on creed or teaching but on personal struggle and direct experience of God, leaving the individual the freedom to make what use he or she wishes of their past religious experience.

I think I would find this most liberating. Indeed I do so find now, because it is what I find that I do already. I would be very happy if I felt that others were doing the same. We are all on a journey and it is important to remember this at all times and make other people's journeys as easy as possible and the Quaker approach is the best I have encountered. If I am on a journey Quakerism is the best mode of transport that I have found so far.

The reference that Bonhoeffer makes to Mark's verse is interesting. It is the one where Jesus cries from the cross 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?' Bonhoeffer at the time must have been feeling something of that sense of being abandoned and I suspect that we all have times in our lives when that is true for us. But it is a very real test of our belief, not in God, but in our own capacity for reconciliation and forgiveness of ourselves and our fellow man. And I find that so hard at times, so hard.

So that is the first future gift that Quakers might offer to the world. (In a sense they have done so since inception but it needs to be re-defined and made more simple and direct).

Change in a Religious Setting

The second aspect of Quakerism that I find very impressive is that it has changed so much over the years and that cannot be true, at any rate to the same extent, for any other Christian denomination. This is partly the result of the need to assert that God never changes – which may or may not be true. But what is observable is that our image of God

changes with our experience of God and so we change our attitudes accordingly. I doubt that it is possible for humankind ever to think that it has observed a universal truth and the way science has evolved tends to confirm this view. So there is little point in saying, or needing to say, that God never changes.

Change is difficult for many of us most of the time. Others are more ready to accept the inevitability of change in human affairs. But there can be few people who do not find change difficult in the things that most concern them. Also there are people who seem able to discern change as it happens and are thus able to contribute to the process and even make change come about while there are others who only notice change when it has happened.

Another aspect of change in a religious setting is that it can be resisted by the traditionalists and then becomes a necessary tool in the control of belief and thus leads either to the slow erosion of faith because there is no change or to fundamentalism.

I consider the erosion of faith first. If any church does not see that their attitudes to belief and ethical matters change then they are ill advised. For instance in my youth those who were divorced were strongly discouraged from attending church, if not being asked to leave. There was no possibility of a divorced person re-marrying in most churches. As the impact of the numbers who became divorced grew and the effect on churches, both in terms of numbers in congregations and in the way people treated each other in the circumstances, a new attitude evolved slowly so that there were blessings of marriages where one or both of the couple involved had been divorced and [l]ater many denominations allowed the re-marriage to happen. This was a huge change and it has occurred almost without most people noticing it. So I think that had the churches not changed attitude on this issue they would have far fewer followers than they have now.

Again, one of the main areas of growth in church life is in the so-called house churches which are often Charismatic or Pentecostal. It is arguable that the reason why many flock to these churches is because they can sweep away the musty traditions of the established denominations and start again in the design of their liturgy and patterns of worship rather as Friends did three hundred years ago. So this suggests the question should Quakers in Britain consider such changes to our way of worship? I am aware that in many meetings, when a visitor has ministered, there is almost a sense of relief that there has been some input. Although I am a passionate advocate for silent worship I would never discount the need to re-evaluate the matter. Silence is even more rare than it was three hundred years ago and it seems that many cannot easily be without sound for very long.

There are dangers in these independent churches. One that concerns me is that they have no check from any other congregation or denominational structure. Of course this is not true of such churches and the New Vineyard and Assemblies of God but there are many others who are totally alone. This can lead to the sort of fundamentalism that

become fanatical and it could be said that the lack of an over-riding authority of any sort in the Muslim world has led to fundamentalism being allowed to grow under fanatical Imams. However this is tricky ground for me because I have limited knowledge of Muslims and their structures. Also it is highly likely that terrorism does not need mosques or any other such institution to flourish even if they can be agents for encouragement occasionally.

Fundamentalism can be fuelled by resistance to change and the insistence that God and whatever religion it is never changes. Misinterpretation of holy books and a sense of living in a world that is not just as far as a particular religion is concerned all add up to a growth in terrorism which would be best resisted by creating a fairer world where the values of the Quaker testimonies were recognised even if people generally were not aware of them.

THE SELFISH GENE

'To go back to first principles . . .'

Walter Redlich, Structures tutor to reluctant architectural students at the start of any problem

Perhaps 'The Gene of Selfishness' would be a better title to this last section of this essay. It is not going to be a rant about Richard Dawkins but some observations about Quakers who I believe have become very selfish in three major ways.

Selfishness - Secrecy:

Quakerism has meant a great deal to me in my life. I have not always been as good a Quaker as I would have wished, partly through where life took me in terms of work and partly through frustration with Friends which led me away for periods of my life. But it has always been there and is an integral part of my life.

So why would I not want to share this precious gift that I have been given? Why would any Quaker not want to share this precious gift?

If we are not ready to share our Quaker approach to life then we do not value it sufficiently in my view. We would not be here today if early Friends had not been inspired to want to spread what they valued so greatly and we will not be here for much longer if we do nothing about spreading Quakerism to those who wish to become involved and to try to live by our principles. Of course many people who will become Friends will already be living 'like a Quaker' but will be glad to discover that we are there and that they will find among us a safe and encouraging environment in which they will be

upheld in the things we and they find important and also find others around them who will strengthen their attitudes to the world and make them stronger.

But there is still a marked reluctance to share our Quakerism, although recently there have been many signs of improvement. I fear that there are many Friends whose own friends do not know that they are Quakers. This reluctance baffles and depresses me for I find it so obvious that we should share what we have. It is as if we held the most beautiful collection of paintings in the world and locked them away in a bank vault so that no one could see them.

Selfishness - Not Paying Our Way

There is another way in which the gene of selfishness demonstrates itself and that is in the fact that, because we are not paying for our Society as we should we are in grave danger of denying future generations the chance to know Quakerism, unless things change, and change soon, in this area of our life together.

I have said enough about the responsibility that each Friend has to make a contribution sufficient to maintain the basic needs of the Society. Then each Friend can choose to support other causes whether Quaker or not. For me, now, Quakers come first – before Amnesty, before saving the planet, before helping an African school in Johannesburg and so on. That is how serious I think the matter has become. And if Quakerism can be resuscitated then all these concerns will be addressed with greater effectiveness, partly through being related and linked as one under our testimonies and partly because we will be stronger and more confident as Quakers and the word will spread that these causes need to be supported.

Selfishness - Not Devoting Time

The third manifestation of the gene of selfishness is a matter of time. There are so many Friends who attend meeting for worship on Sunday, go to the occasional business meeting and do nothing else 'as a Quaker'. There are many Friends who complain that all they do at Area Meeting is discuss property matters. That is because in many cases Quakers do nothing else except attend Sunday morning meeting.

As I said in the section about Local Meeting, unless we do more in our own communities as Quakers we will fail to connect, fail to attract new members and fail to become well grounded meetings because doing things together is what binds a meeting most strongly. I believe that if Quakers did more together at Local Meeting level then they would be happier through a shared sense of achievement. And whoever is available, however old or few in number they are and however unlikely it seems there is always something that they can do in the area for some good purpose. It takes thought, imagination, commitment, some money and determination.

So the three 'genes of selfishness', keeping Quakerism secret, not paying our way and not giving enough time are the real threats to our future existence. The rest is detail, important, but detail.

What Now?

If Friends can realise that by devoting just a little more time, a little more money and become a little more open about being a Quaker then we will have a future.

These three things are 'big asks', and any one of them would be a challenge on its own, but we have to face all three.

And being in a state of crisis, as I believe we are, may prove to be the catalyst that brings individual Friends to their senses.

We are not beyond hope – yet – but are in danger of blundering blindly into oblivion unless we are prepared to show that we value all that we stand for, are willing to honour our past and ready to build a future for our beloved Society, as one Friend called it in *'The Friend'* a few weeks ago.