

27 NOV 2009

## The Society of Friends in the year 2020

### Introduction

I am sitting with a group of Quakers in the Cadbury Room at Woodbrooke College on the 1<sup>st</sup> of January 2020. It is afternoon since many of us had been up late the previous night, seeing the new year in. We are talking about how the Society of Friends had changed over the previous ten years, and what had prompted these changes. Some are new to the Society and want to know more about this as well as to learn about what it was like now (2020). I begin to speak:

It started with a letter to the Friend in 2009 drawing attention to predictions made in various journals about the demise of the Society based on declining numbers of members and attenders over the past 100 years. Some were predicting 2032 as the end point for Quakers, based on trends in membership, unless radical action was taken to stem this decline..

Within the Society, some new initiatives had started, such as Quaker Quest and the Kindlers. Quaker weeks were getting well established with a range of outreach activities such as open air meetings, Quaker meetings in schools and stalls in markets. The Quaker emphasis on finding ones own spiritual path and then testing this out with others fitted the mood of the times. Many people were seeking a deeper meaning and purpose in their lives and were not finding this need met by the mainstream churches. Living out our testimonies on peace, justice and simplicity as opposed to assenting to theological propositions appealed to those who wanted to take action on the issues facing the world such as climate change, war and world poverty.

And yet despite all this numbers had been dropping. Income for Central work was going down. And local meetings had been finding it increasingly difficult to appoint to positions on committees. So what was wrong?

Changes had been made... Trustees had been appointed to oversee the Society and Meeting for Sufferings no longer had an executive role. And had agreed a Framework for Action for the next ten years.

But was all this radical enough? Questions started to be asked around that time.

--How could we rediscover the energy and passion of early Friends?

--Were we too obsessed with the past? We had a great heritage but how much of it was still relevant in 2009?

--Was our business method still serving us as well as it had in the past?

--Could we operate with a more slimmed down structure, and fewer committees?

--How far were we learning from other movements which seemed to be growing in strength and numbers such as the Transition town movement and Climate Camps

--Was silence sometimes used as a way of not dealing with uncomfortable issues?

--Did it have to take quite so long to bring about important changes in the way the Society operated?

--Could we find ways of bridging the divide between adult and young Quakers? How could young people be genuinely integrated into the life of the Society ?

-- A recent survey had showed how ignorant people were about Quakers. 50% of a sample interviewed thought Quakers were 'very strict' in their religious outlook, and 23% thought Quakers were a closed group. How could we make people more aware of who we were and what we stood for?

Through these questions we started to consider what was essential to the Society and how we could rediscover that sense of urgency that early Friends had.

We no longer believed in a second coming and yet all around us there were signs of more discord and impending disasters, the foremost of which was global warming and the consequences for the world as a whole if this was not addressed properly. Many Friends were deeply involved in this issue and yet we seemed to lack a way of discussing it within the Society as a whole. Young Quakers were expressing their frustration at long discussions about issues of theological belief at the expense of dealing with the major issues facing the world.

Whilst we had a wide diversity of belief, there were strict rules about processes and behaviours, some of them unwritten. We thought of ourselves as open to new light but in many ways were quite conservative in the way we ran our affairs.

So what were the key elements we had to preserve at all costs.

**Ultimately it came down to being a Spirit led and guided Society, seeking a just and sustainable way of living for everyone and witnessing to the Truth as we saw it. Nothing more, nothing less. And the fruit of this witness had to be in the way we lived our lives, related to others and sought to change the world.**

### **How was the world changing**

In seeking the right way forward, we thought carefully about how the world was changing and looked around for key trends:

- Many people were seeking a spiritual path but were not finding it within the mainstream churches. Numbers in all the mainstream churches were declining. Also there was a move away from organisations to which one had to belong and people were increasingly reluctant to make formal commitments.
- On the political front there was evidence that the world was facing major changes and that in the face of an uncertain future, some people were turning to rightwing organisations and blaming ethnic minorities or other minority groups for the problems they faced.
- Ways of communicating had changed enormously, aided by the Internet and mobile phones and we needed to take that into account in looking at possible changes.
- Some of the most successful new organisations such as the Transition Town movement and Climate Change camps had very loose structures and were run more as networks. They didn't have formal committees. Groups came and went, in line with people's energy and commitment.
- In our view the most important changes to be faced were how the world coped with the twin challenges of peak oil and climate change. People were going to have to change the way they lived as they moved to a low carbon economy, and yet most people were unwilling or unable to do this. There was an opportunity for Quakers to play a key role here, alongside other faith communities. Other faiths were creating long term plans to address these challenges and Quakers needed to create their own. There was evidence this was happening but in a somewhat piecemeal way.

## **How the Society of Friends has adapted to meet these new challenges**

Over the years since 2009 we in the Society of Friends have changed our structures, processes and ways of working but all the time guided by a few key principles:

- We needed to ensure that the spirit flowed freely through the Society.
- We had to look for signs of new life and find ways of encouraging them.
- Our structures had to become more flexible, less rigid.
- Discernment was a key part of the way we worked but we needed to recognise that there was more than one way of carrying this out.
- Though small, we had a lot of credibility with other organisations and were respected for what we did. We needed to build on this and facilitate more cross sharing of ideas and action in the areas we had expertise in.
- We needed to develop a vision of what we wanted the Society to look like.

### **Language**

Most of us no longer use the same language that the early Friends use since it doesn't speak to many who want to hear our message. So we don't talk about seeking God's will when the concept of God is no longer relevant to many and instead talk about finding the right path or a clear way forward. We are increasingly seeing our spirituality as a way of seeing the world or having a different frame of mind from those who do not share our views. However we are tolerant to those who use traditional Christian language or use language from Eastern religions.

Other historical names such as Meeting for Sufferings have disappeared (not without anguish on the part of older friends) We are finding this process easier than many of the traditional churches since we do not have the same doctrines or set beliefs and so can adapt more easily to new ways of expressing our spiritual beliefs.

### **Business method**

Discerning the right way forward and seeking guidance in our decision making is still a bedrock of our business method. However we have become more flexible about the best way of carrying this out. The traditional Quaker business method is still used and other methods, used outside Quakers, have developed, depending on the issues being discussed, for instance idea storming, using hand signals to signify agreement or disagreement, and different ways of registering dissent. The ultimate aim is still the same, as we are guided in reaching the best decision and in helping people move forward in unity We respect difference and diversity, and accept that the final outcome may be different from what each person expects it to be. The skills involved in acting as Clerk or facilitator have been seen as even more crucial and there is much more training for people to exercise these roles but since there are fewer committees, this has become more manageable.

We are no longer so obsessed with drafting the perfectly formed minute and recognise that in the past much valuable time and opportunity was wasted in this. Is it good enough for the moment is the criterion, since we recognise that situations change so quickly that it may no longer be relevant in a few months time.

## **Spirituality and Worship**

In 2009 the recession had led many people to rethink their approach to material goods and consumerism. A new trend was beginning to emerge in which the hectic lifestyles of the previous 50 years was seriously questioned and different values were slowly beginning to emerge. The Transition Town movement helped by highlighting the need to move to a low carbon future and the local community became a more focal point for many people. Our Quaker emphasis on simplicity merged with this trend and we were able to find new alliances in which we could point people to a different way of living which focused less on amassing material wealth.

We started to see how many of our Quaker practices could be introduced into other arenas, rather than expecting people to come to us. We recognised the importance of Quakers acting as the yeast to bring about change in small ways through our work and the way we lived our lives.

Within our meetings, we became aware that silence could be used to mask conflict and deal with difference. Many people were saying that Quakers were more interested in dealing with conflict overseas than with differences or conflicts in their own meetings. Silence had been used as a way of hiding conflict and there was not enough opportunity to share our beliefs, although this was beginning to change through the work of local learning groups and Quaker life initiatives. This was another area where we learned from young Quakers who had more informality in their worship and were not afraid to try out different ways of worshipping in a semi-programmed format. People are less afraid to challenge each other now. These changes in how Quakers deal with conflict have been slow to take root since they went against a strong culture in which expressing strong emotion was not considered to be the Quaker way. However several things have helped to bring this about:

- 1) The increasing divisions in society and the need to be clear about what we stand for, as Quakers.
- 2) More flexibility in our business method .as we became aware that the way we had been carrying it out sometimes hid real differences, especially when a Clerk acted in a very controlling way.
- 3) The growth of groups such as Experiment with Light which have now become more mainstream. This helped to bring about more awareness that a meeting for worship is not just an hour to spend in a cosy reflection on ones life but can open one up to some very strong and uncomfortable experiences. So we have become less reluctant to acknowledge our shadow side and our own shortcomings. We recognised that many of us had come from churches where there was a lot of emphasis on guilt and sin, and valued Quakers as an escape from that world. However we had moved away from the power that Fox and the early Quakers had found in seeing that 'there was an ocean of darkness and death, but an infinite ocean of light and love, which flowed over the ocean of darkness'.

## **The Structures of the Society**

Over the years there has been increasing division between the inclusivists as they have come to be called, who hold to the mainstream Quaker tradition , and believe in the authority of the corporate body, as expressed in Yearly Meetings, and those who are more concerned with their own spiritual growth and pursue many other non-Quaker activities.(sometimes known as syncretists) At one point it appeared that this

might lead to separate organisations being set up but a way forward was reached by adopting a much more flexible structure, in which, as well as local meetings, other groups are affiliated to the centre and have the same status as local meetings. We now see the Society more as a network of Quaker affiliated groups. This includes groups such as the Quaker pagans and Experiment with Light groups which from being on the fringes of the Society are now recognised as having a key role to play alongside local meetings. Also there has been a growth of virtual groups who share a common interest and communicate mainly through the internet, although they may come together at meetings held over a weekend. Groups come and go more than in the past and this is less a concern than it used to be.

Local meetings are still a core part of the Society. Increasingly Quakers have been seen as having a key role to play in bringing different faiths, religious and non-religious groups together. This is because of our lack of formal doctrines and being open to seeing truth in many different religious and spiritual traditions. We are less concerned about people becoming Quakers and more about helping them to find the right spiritual path and a deeper dimension to their life. However this has in no way diminished our commitment to social activism.

We no longer divide people into members and attenders but allow people to live out their commitments in whatever way they feel appropriate. Meetings are organised in as simple way as possible, and many jobs are shared out. Finding people to fill posts had become increasing difficult for small meetings and more assistance between meetings now takes place, for instance having meetings in separate places but sharing a business meeting or a treasurer. Also asking for help is much more common than it used to be.

A common commitment to the Quaker Testimonies, and a belief in the importance of creating sacred spaces in which people can come together to find a deeper dimension to their lives through silence or group meditation are what keeps these groups together as part of the Quaker network. However they are not all organised in the same way. And there is flexibility for the groups and meetings to be shaped by the needs of its members.

## **Yearly Meeting**

What used to be called Britain Yearly Meeting still exists but it is run in a different way. There are a variety of programmes going on in parallel which are run using approaches developed in other settings, such as world café sessions in which people can move around from one group to another to look at different topics. And there is flexibility for new concerns to emerge during the course of the event and for people to create their own agendas. This can lead to more unpredictable situations but we are less anxious about this now and have found that it can generate an enormous amount of new energy. An outline structure is agreed in advance but the very detailed planning which used to characterise events in 2010 has disappeared. The spiritual dimension of the event is still the foundation stone although the expression of this now takes different forms. Silence is still seen as a key but not the only way of reaching a deeper level.

At the large sessions, different groups who have met earlier (including young people) feed in the outcomes of their discussions and each group appoints a spokesperson to put forward the result of their deliberations. So the final decision is made taking into account all this work. An outcome is agreed and the final wording is worked out by a small group, made up of representatives from the different groups. This avoids the previous system in which an enormous amount of time used to be spent agreeing the

detailed wording which gave less time for discussion of the key issues facing the Society.

### **Local Meeting Houses**

Where meetings own premises, many are now thriving centres with a range of activities, especially focusing on multi-faith activities, since we are increasingly being seen as a place where different faiths can come together. Meditation groups, Yoga sessions and activities focusing on different aspects of spirituality are common in many meeting houses. Also people feel free just to come in and sit down, as they do in a church. Information is freely available and we now have more material linked to climate change and ways of changing ones lifestyle.

Groups who wish to have different ceremonies for weddings and funerals are increasingly using our premises. Either they carry out their ceremony on their own or they may be given help and advice by the meeting celebrants.

All these activities are bringing in extra income which is used to cover the costs of the building and staff.

### **Young people**

Events for young people in 2009 were recognised to be something the Society did really well. Young people returned again and again because of the special atmosphere that was created at these events but many of them dropped away as they became older. Finding ways of truly involving young people was seen as a key way to breathe new life into the Society as a whole. This needed to include a recognition that they do have different views and approaches...we are not all the same. But recognising this difference and learning from them as well engaging in debate was seen as a vital part of our growth.

We still have special events for young people since they are clearly valued a great deal. However at our large events, there are also many workshops at which young people and adults work together on issues, or carry out artistic and similar activities. And when we have large sessions, the views of the young people are now fed into the debate in a way which informs the decisions taken, rather than having separate minutes read out which are just listened to but not acted on, as used to be the pattern. The way our business sessions are run makes this process easier. (as described in the previous section).

Our local meetings have also learned a great deal from the way young people run their events. There are more semi-programmed meetings in which children and young people participate as well as readings and music, and more sharing of beliefs. The pattern is shaped by those involved and there is acceptance of greater diversity.

### **Prophecy**

One of our concerns in 2009 was that the prophetic tradition within Quakers seemed to be waning. Many people were attracted by seeing how Quakers lived their lives and were active in many important social movements such as the peace movement, climate change and groups concerned with social justice.

The divisions within society as a whole were increasing, with movements for greater social control gaining favour as people became more worried about their own



security and fearful about many of the changes they saw around them. Over the last ten years we have worked at every level in society, including schools, youth groups, political parties but also have been realistic about what we could achieve.

We have worked at healing our own divisions between the social activists and those more concerned with their own spiritual and personal growth. As we simplified our structures, we found we had more time and energy to devote to these matters. We realised that as Quakers we had something uniquely precious to offer in the blend of the inner and the outer; and in seeing genuine spirituality as something which must be fostered and nurtured but also find expression in the way we live our lives.

Finding times to create spaces in peoples lives was increasingly valued as the pressures within society increased. This linked to movements which were putting emphasis back on the value of local communities.

So we started to look again at what prophesy meant in our age. It wasn't about issuing press releases on every topic that came up since there was too much comment already and we were bombarded with news and views. Instead we saw it as the outcome of many Quakers working away in their local communities shaping local events often in small ways and making alliances with those who shared our views. And our prophesy was rooted in our commitment to our Testimonies.

## **Testimony**

We have rediscovered the crucial importance of testimony and letting our lives speak as what underpins everything and unites us as Quakers. We now have a more shared understanding of the different testimonies, and more consensus about the implications of living out our Testimonies. Commitments are expressed in many different ways, some within families, others in their local communities, others at a National or International level

The practical expression of our Testimonies has become more focused and we now have an explicit Testimony to the Environment which has come to be seen as the most crucial area for Quaker involvement. Climate change has been leading to more conflict, and a less peaceful world, and has produced more inequality since the developing countries are affected more severely. Our Testimony to simplicity has led us to live in a less consumerist way and to focus on ways of living at a deeper level, as well as develop our sense of being connected to other people wherever they live.

We have now an overall plan for how we respond to the issue of climate change, and have involved our fellow Quakers overseas in this process. In 2009 there were many initiatives going on within the Quaker world but they were not integrated in any meaningful way. A conference held at Windsor in 2009 of faith groups showed how important such groups were in developing both awareness and action in this field and other Faith groups such as Islam were developing their own plans.

Our plan emerged slowly but included responsibilities at every level, ie individual, local meetings and local communities, action in the work place, and what needed to be done at national and international levels. We also looked at how we could work with other groups in which Quakers were already involved, such as the Transition Town movement, Climate Justice Network and Climate Camp activists.

What emerged was not a plan in the traditional sense but a living document based on a positive view of the future, which was constantly changing and adapting but with a strong spiritual underpinning and based on principles which stemmed from our Testimonies.. The emphasis was on how to live a more meaningful life and what part we could all play in this process. Young people were fully involved in this process,

and helped draw up different parts of it, especially bringing in other less cerebral elements such as songs and pictures.

Much of the work was done through the Internet, using sites such as Facebook and virtual working groups. It is still a very live piece of work and is constantly being changed and added to.

### **Friends House and the role of Central Committees and staff**

The Framework for Action which was agreed in 2009 set us on a different path. Central staff started to work more closely with local meetings as outlined in the Framework. Many Central Committees including both Quaker Life and Quaker Peace and Social Witness have been set down and instead groups are set up with specific tasks under the overall direction of the Trustees. This has freed up staff from the time they used to spend reporting to committees, especially in QPSW. The model adopted by Quaker Life, in which people were asked if they want to do particular jobs, is now used more widely. A comprehensive data base is kept at Friends House of the skills and interests of Quakers throughout the country, and details of work that needs doing is sent to interested people. Sometimes this results in individuals carrying out the work or it may involve the setting up of a group. Once the work has been carried out, the group is laid down. This result of this is that new issues can be dealt with more quickly than in the past. Many of them are tackled in a similar way to climate change (as described in the last section) although on a smaller scale.

So our decision making processes have become more responsive. For issues of major importance where there is lack of unity, we accept that more time will be needed. Meeting for Sufferings has changed a great deal. We did not feel it was functioning as well as it might in 2009, after the decision making powers were given to the Trustees. There was too much reporting and listening to accounts of work being carried out, and less opportunity to innovate and be creative. Now it meets once a quarter and the agenda is not all fixed. As well a reduced number of regular representatives, other people can attend if they have a particular concern which they want to express and this is notified in advance so that others who share that concern can attend as well if they wish. This is then discussed and passed onto a small group which includes staff, who assess whether this needs further work and if so how it can be progressed. For instance it might be sent to one of the existing groups under the Trustees or a new group could be set up to take it further.

### **Overseas Work**

Our overseas work was already changing in 2009, away from running long term projects and towards facilitating and networking, more in tune with an organisation with limited finance and resources. The practice of using Friends with knowledge and expertise to carry out work is still used but mainly for specific pieces of work on a short term basis. We have learnt from the work carried out in Nagaland in North Eastern India in which a small group of Quakers with expertise in conflict resolution go out periodically to work with groups seeking an end to the conflict. And also from the success of the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel, which combined short term peace work with advocacy on ones return. We have developed programmes using similar approaches.

More meetings have developed links with partners overseas, either in areas of conflict or with fellow Quaker groups overseas.



## **Nominations**

Our way of appointing to groups and committee has changed, partly because we were not attracting many of the people who might be able to contribute to the work. We still use our traditional nominations process to fill key roles such as Trustees.

However for many other groups, people are now able to volunteer their services and if the group finds it helpful to have that person, they can accept them onto the group.

Some groups advertise in the Friend and on the website what they are doing and ask for the kind of people who could contribute.

This change has enabled a lot of new people, some on the fringes of the Society, to bring new energy and passion to our work. Many are young people who were missed by the nominations system since they were not aware of or didn't use the traditional yellow form which people were supposed to fill in.

## **Conclusion**

George Fox said ..'the Spirit that gave forth the scriptures teacheth us how to pray, sing, fast and to give thanks..The true faith changeth not, which is the gift of God and a mystery held in a pure conscience'

And Paul said in the letter to the Galatians

'The fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control'

Within the Society of Friends we have changed a great deal since 2009. We still have differences to deal with, conflicts and frustrations. But that is the nature of being human. We have freed up the Society so that these things are dealt with more openly and we can now focus our energies on developing our witness to the world and deepening our spiritual life. We are rediscovering the passion and commitment that characterised early Quakers and in the process are attracting people who are seeking a deeper meaning to their lives. The Quaker way is needed more than ever in the world of 2020. Increasingly people are coming to see that Quakers have a jewel of exquisite worth to offer to the world.

