

Quakers: Where next?

Introduction

In recent decades Quakerism has seemed, in a number of ways, to be reaching towards a deeper spiritual life and a more contemporary relevance. At the same time there is unease and uncertainty about our identity and our direction. Dissatisfaction has been expressed about the relative poverty of the spiritual life and sense of community in some of our meetings. Our numbers have been dropping year by year and yet until quite recently we have largely neglected outreach. Attendance at business meetings has dwindled.

Within this mixed picture, and whatever our current shortcomings, there are good reasons for hope. We have many strengths. There are clear signs of growth, and we could evolve from where we are now into something far richer. Meeting members already gain a lot from their life together and from Britain Yearly Meeting as a whole, and could gain far more if our Quakerism developed its full potential. If that happened, the role we play within society and internationally would also be further energised. Already well respected for our work, we could see our influence grow.

In this essay I want to outline what I see as our present strengths and weaknesses, and then discuss some possible ways forward.

Our strengths

One of our great assets is **our membership**, which though numerically small includes many gifted and committed people whose skills and experience are put at the service of their meetings and the wider Quaker community. These include those engaged in important and sometimes ground-breaking work teaching in our study centres, putting on courses and workshops, producing written material, and working within our central bodies. In all sorts of ways they and others are seeking to explore, deepen and renew Quaker experience.

Another of our core strengths is a **spirituality that is unfettered by doctrines or creeds**. Beliefs are considered unimportant compared to experience, so that we are free, individually and collectively, to follow a spiritual path that originates from within. We are helped on that path by what we gain from each other and from the courses and materials available to us through our central committees and from our study centres, which offer consistently outstanding courses to nurture, challenge and inspire us.

Our **form of worship** emphasises stillness, listening and receptivity, and our meetings for worship, at their best, can be times when we go deeper than our everyday consciousness, and when important experiences and insights are shared. When new people start attending meeting, they often talk about 'coming home', because they feel it is what they have always wanted and didn't know existed.

We also have the tradition of **group sharing** in activities such as creative listening and worship sharing, which encourage listening at a deeper level than in everyday conversation or discussion, and helps us to think and speak from our centre. Such groups can also help us to get to know one another at a deeper level than is often possible just chatting over coffee after meeting for worship.

We are a community of people with **shared values and concerns**. This means we can support one another in the working out of these values, and we are also supported and encouraged by our central organisation. Important centrally-managed work is carried out on our behalf.

Our meetings are places where **everyone can make a contribution**. In the absence of ordained ministers, and with all functions are shared by meeting members, we can take on all sorts of service over the years. Our abilities can be used and abilities we didn't know we had can be brought out. This can be a very major source of satisfaction and of personal development.

Our **business method** is distinctive in two very valuable ways. First, we are seeking unity at a deep level rather than simply consensus. This can bring a genuine sense of satisfaction and achievement on the occasions when people manage to set aside their previous opinions and to really listen to each other, and when differences are not ignored but worked with. Second, our minutes are written then and there, with all present sharing responsibility for the minute as an accurate reflection of the discussion.

We were **trail-blazers** in past in fields such as peace, equality, social justice, penal reform and mental health. Since our inception, the other churches have changed radically in what they see as their mission, so that we and they now share far more in our attitudes to social justice, global poverty, care of the environment and so on. Nevertheless the main churches still in many cases hold attitudes to matters such as sexuality and the role of women which are influenced by their understanding of the Bible. We are free from this constraint and can therefore give a lead on some issues. The other churches still accept the Bible as their ultimate authority, whereas for us the **primary source of truth** is found within us, through individual and corporate discernment. This releases us in a powerful way in our search for truth, so that we have been able to take action in areas that have remained problematic for many churches (and some other faiths). For instance, not only do we see women as being fully equal with men, able to fill all roles within our organisation, but we have in recent decades played a progressive role among churches in calling for equality for gay people and other sexual minorities. A thrilling example of this is our recent ground-breaking decision, at Yearly Meeting, to widen Quaker marriage to include same-sex couples, and calling on the government to enable same-sex couples to marry legally. This reliance on our own discernment to move ahead on particular issues is a huge strength. Our openness to change, even if slower than some would like, is one of the important contributions Quakers can make within the community of churches and faiths and within society.

In all these ways we are well placed to play an important role in Britain today, provided we address our shortcomings and intensify our drive for renewal.

Our weaknesses

Despite so many strengths and advantages, we are not yet the rich, vital community that we could be. We have real weaknesses that need to be addressed in new ways.

Our spiritual life

Dissatisfaction has often been expressed about the spiritual life of our meetings. While some people feel satisfied by what they experience in their meeting, many others do not. This is testified to by letters and articles in Quaker publications over the years, as well as (in my own experience) by many conversations with other Quakers. For some people there is too little to inspire or nurture or challenge them in their worship and in the general life of their meeting.

One very major weakness seems to me to be that we are over-concerned with faithfulness to the external forms of our heritage, and not concerned enough about the inner, spiritual heritage. We so deeply cherish our Quaker traditions, our historic meeting houses, our ways of doing things, our Quaker terminology, our title of Religious Society of Friends, and so on. But at the same time we seem to be badly neglecting some of the most crucial part of our inheritance, the part that concerns the inner life. We are too rule-bound, too inclined to do things 'the way they have always been done'. The established forms have become to some extent a strait-jacket. This includes our use of

archaic language, which can both obscure meaning and make it difficult for newcomers to feel included. For instance, the name Meeting for Sufferings gives no idea of what this body actually is or does. And there are a host of Quaker terms and sayings that are similarly obscure to people of our own century. This seems to me a wrong way of revering our heritage. How does such usage sit with the Quaker testimony to simplicity? Originally such usages were the ordinary, clear way of expressing things. Margaret Fell said it was a 'poor, silly gospel' to attach great importance to wearing plain clothes. I think that judgement applies equally to our attachment to old Quaker language. How can we appeal to newcomers, how can we claim to be inclusive, when we use outdated language to express our meaning? How can we move forward spiritually when we make an idol of particular ways of doing things? Being chained to the past in these ways does a real disservice to our life in the present.

All movements have a tendency to ossify after their early years, for forms to be retained and revered even after some of the spirit that produced them is lost. For a movement to remain fully alive, each generation needs to rediscover for itself what is at the heart of its faith and practice. We quote George Fox's question 'What canst thou say?', but are not so good at answering it with our own freshly-discovered truth in language that belongs to our own time. Of course we need to value and build on what has gone before, but deadness sets in when the forms in which our experience and our truth are expressed look back to an earlier age.

What is our spirituality actually about these days? We all agree belief is not the main thing, but what is the main thing? We usually say, experience – but what experience, and experience at what depth? What is spoken and written among us can be powerful and involving, but overall the spiritual life of meetings and of British Quakerism doesn't seem to be as cohesive or as powerful as it could be. Spoken ministry in worship, while sometimes deeply engaging, can also be tame and routine, or rather abstract, spoken more from the head than from the heart or soul. This must be one indicator of the spiritual health of a meeting, and when we compare our present-day ministry with the impassioned ministry of the founding Quakers, we see how much of their power and assurance we have lost. Is this because we are not experiencing anything compelling enough in our inner life, so that we have not often got anything really inspiring to share? It is hard to avoid this conclusion. But if so, as a body we are spiritually only half alive, however much good work we do in the world.

Meeting as community

Our spirituality as a body is inseparable from how successful our meetings are as communities. I feel meetings have a long way to go before they become the full, close communities that would help us live our lives in the very best way possible. Even in meetings that have gone through the very useful experience of Hearts and Minds Prepared and other material, and have run sharing groups of various kinds (as is the case in my own meeting), I doubt if there is often a situation in which most members of the meeting feel they know most of the others at any great depth, know what the important issues in their lives are, know what is going on for them at any one time, know and understand their deep thoughts and feelings, fears and hopes. This is certainly the case with my own meeting, and I have the impression that it is also true of a great many meetings. They are too much like what the American Quaker Patricia Loring calls pseudo-communities, in her book *Listening Spirituality*.

The psychological dimension

Quakers seem to have an image of being kindly, reasonable, 'nice' people who do good work in the world, who deplore violence and uphold peace. But this is a list of positives without the inevitable accompanying negatives. The psychologist Jung realised that we all have one side of us that we are happy to show the world, and another side, which he called the Shadow, which we keep hidden, perhaps even from ourselves and certainly from other people, because we fear that that part of us

will not be accepted. Modern psychologists have largely accepted this basic idea of a banished dark side, and have, like Jung, pointed to the impoverishment of the whole person when it is left hidden instead of being integrated into the personality. Quakers do seem to have largely failed to engage with the Shadow.

What is true of individuals is also true of groups. Group dynamics seem to be given little attention in Quaker circles, despite the importance of understanding what is happening in the group process. The issue of power within our meetings is little mentioned, but clearly some people, those with stronger personalities, stronger convictions, or greater self-assurance, have more power than others – power to influence decisions, to be heard, to be taken notice of. I was once told of a situation in a small Meeting where one very dominant member effectively made the decisions because she would say what she thought and then nobody else felt able or willing to risk offending her by putting a different point of view. This must be an extreme case (and the reality may have been exaggerated), but even so I suspect that in most meetings there are members whose opinion carries far more weight than others, and members whose voices for whatever reason are little heard. The whole business of looking at who plays what kind of role within the group and what unconscious needs and motivations might be involved, is something we seem to completely ignore.

Quakers and peace

The psychological dimension of community includes the issue of the inevitable frictions and conflicts that will arise in any group. Quakers are renowned for our work in peace-making and reconciliation out in the world. We seem to be much less successful at resolving issues that arise closer to home. It seems to be much harder to face each other and talk through issues that have arisen in our meetings than it is to practise reconciliation processes out in the world. It is frightening and difficult for most of us to face our fears about conflict. It can feel as if bringing issues into the open will cause unpleasantness and make things worse. But leaving things to fester is not a healthy option.

Listening

Linked to the psychological and spiritual dimensions of our life as Quakers is the fact that most, if not all, of us find it exceptionally difficult to listen deeply and truly to what we are hearing from another person - or to what is being communicated to us within ourselves. How can we hope to understand another person if we cannot listen to them deeply, how can we grow as individuals and as meetings if we cannot listen deeply enough to our own inner source of wisdom? And how can we listen in this way if we are too afraid to penetrate into the darker recesses of our own being? We urgently need to find answers to these questions.

Our theology – Christian or not?

A further difficulty is that we are still collectively unsure of our religious identity. For decades there has been the running discussion about whether or not British Quakerism is still basically Christian (alongside its acceptance of other faiths as valid paths). A survey some years ago showed that about half of all Quakers no longer identified themselves as Christian. We say we are universalist, but at the same time continue to give Christianity a special place. We seem to be muddled and disunited.

Business meetings

Our business meetings at local and area level are not in a healthy state. In our local business meetings the problem is perhaps less acute than at area level, as the business dealt with is of more direct relevance, and a larger proportion of people tend to be involved. Even so many, if not most, people vote with their feet and show that they are content to let others make the decisions. The reasons must include the fact that these meetings are seldom very satisfying. They can be rather flat, rather lengthy, and often have agendas over-burdened with matters that could better be dealt

with in other ways than in full session. And, again, there are the group dynamics, and the problem of some people doing much more of the talking than others.

The situation is worse, at least in my area and I think more widely, with area meetings. These should in theory help bridge the gap between the centre of our organisation and the local level, as well as helping people in local meetings to feel they belong to something wider than just their own meeting. But this doesn't actually seem to happen very much. In my own area, attendance at AM has declined dramatically over the years, and it tends to be the same few people who go month after month.

One problem with area meetings is that they tend to go on for hours, and people are reluctant to sacrifice their precious Sunday afternoons or weekday evenings. But even more off-putting is the content. The meetings are felt by many to be tedious and largely irrelevant to their own concerns or the concerns of their meeting. There is often also the depressing feeling that whether one is there or not makes little or no difference. A frequent criticism is that area meeting is all mundane business, with little if any spiritual content, even though it is supposed to be essentially a meeting for worship. So what incentive is there to attend unless one is part of the minority who actually enjoy attending? The agenda in my own area meeting often consists mainly of hearing reports, and membership matters - someone has applied for membership, or wants their membership to be moved to another area, or a member has died. That person is probably unknown to most present except the few who are in that person's own meeting, so it is hard to feel much interest. Periodically ideas are canvassed in an attempt to make area meeting more attractive to people and to encourage greater attendance, but then things just carry on the same. This seems like an area of deadness in our communal life.

How can we move forward from where we are?

With these difficulties and weaknesses in our life as a Quaker body, what can we do that would lead to regeneration? How can we become a body that helps its members develop their spiritual lives to the full? How could our input into our society and the world, already significant, be further deepened?

Our spiritual life and the psychological dimension

Any spirituality worth having must be transformational. It must help us to find meaning and purpose, to live our lives in a way that corresponds to our values and our inner guidance, and help us discern that inner guidance. Deep down we all long to be transformed, to be freed from our shallow, self-centred egos into fuller life. The lives of the early Quakers were totally transformed in a process in which they let themselves be searched by what they called the Light, or Christ, or the Spirit, so that they saw the darker parts of themselves. This process they shared with each other in their meetings. The honest facing of the truth about themselves, and the experience of sharing it and having it accepted, seems to have been what set them free to become the inspired, courageous and resilient people that we read about. They had been re-born as new people, and they wanted to pass on to others the wonderful truth that everyone could find this radical renewal. And not only did they individually gain this new freedom and energy, but the nascent Quaker movement as a whole was characterised by the same freedom and energy, and grew despite the fierce opposition and persecution they encountered.

Of course, the early Quakers were living through a time of great religious ferment, and we are not. The society we live in is radically different from theirs. So inevitably our spiritual path will differ from theirs. We do not have the same possibility of being caught up in a tremendous social and religious upheaval. Nevertheless human beings do all have the potential to be transformed in a similar way to that experienced by the early Quakers. This is the vital insight both of faith systems and of modern psychology – that by going inwards and facing more of the truth about ourselves we can

begin to loosen the hold of the ego and of our faults and weaknesses. We can begin to become free of our needs, our selfishness, our greed and our fearfulness. Patricia Loring writes powerfully about this in *Listening Spirituality*. She contrasts the way the ego operates with the quality she calls 'yieldedness' - the ability to let go of rigid positions and to be open so that we can grow in spiritual maturity. She sees spiritual communities as places where we can gradually learn self-transcendence, becoming less governed by the ego and coming to live more from our true centre.

The ego and the Shadow

This transcending of the ego is at the heart of Buddhism and indeed of Christianity, as well as being the path discovered by mystics of all faiths. It is also the way to inner peace and fulfilment taught by many modern spiritual teachers who are unattached to any particular faith system. (Eckart Tolle is one whom some members of my own meeting have found extremely well worth studying.) The ego and its power have such baneful effects on our ability to be properly alive in the present moment, and on our ability to feel connected at the deepest level to each other, to all things, and to the divine. Surely this inner-freeing and at-oneness is what Jesus meant when he said 'The Kingdom of God is within you.' He and other teachers of past times did not use terms like the ego, but it was what they were talking about, and we need to collectively recognize this as a core issue for us.

So we cannot separate spirituality from psychology. Quakers need to take very seriously the existence of the ego and the need to lessen its power over us. Equally we need to give more attention to the Shadow. Jung recognized that allowing the contents of the Shadow to come into full consciousness is the only way in which they can be integrated into the personality as a whole. Through this integration the negative is transformed and becomes a valuable part of the whole Self. This process is inevitably slow and painful, but those who have set out on this road, whether through journaling, meditation, therapy or other means, find that their life is enormously enriched and given greater meaning. Perhaps this is a path that will never suit everyone. But if more and more of us were to recognise more fully the workings of our own ego, and to address the darkness within ourselves; and if at the same we became better able to throw light on the group dynamics at work in our meetings, I think this would be an important part of both individual and collective renewal.

It is sometimes thought that only people with major problems have the sort of dark side that needs addressing. But although the extent of it varies between individuals, modern psychologists have shown that it is a universal fact of human experience. The psychologist Dorothy Rowe writes very graphically about the darkness that is in every one of us. She describes a pit of raging and hostile emotions shut up in the depths of all of us, not just in people who have been particularly badly treated as children. It happens simply because no parenting has ever been or can ever be perfect, and because children do have to learn social norms of behaviour, and so some impulses have to be repressed. Emotions like envy, rage, even hatred, are locked up in the recesses of the child's mind, and remain there unacknowledged but doing damage in unconscious ways unless or until they are allowed into the light of day, and accepted, and integrated.

This is the trouble with repressed negative feelings – they are not harmless, like lumber stored in an attic. They cause a lot of harm, partly by depriving the personality of some of its most vital energy, and partly by leaking out in all sorts of subtle ways, unsuspected by the person concerned but often felt by others and causing problems in relationships. Freud said it was like when a noisy heckler is ejected from a lecture hall because his presence is felt to be intolerable, but those inside are still not free of him because he continues to batter the door trying to get back in.

People are often inclined to be sceptical about these psychological theories. And there is a tendency, including among Quakers, to regard it as unhealthy or self-indulgent to enquire into the deeper reaches of oneself, as though this was a selfish and possibly dangerous activity for no good

purpose. Perhaps such interpretations are a rationalisation: maybe people instinctively feel that to delve inwards would be painful and destabilising, threatening to destroy their peace of mind and their sense of who they are.

But although Quakerism seems to have largely lost the will to engage with this sort of inward process, there have been real stirrings in recent years. The work of Rex Ambler's Experiment with Light movement has helped to uncover the real, inner nature of early Quaker experience, and this has led to a growing interest in this heritage and to the formation of Light groups in meetings around the country. There are also ongoing courses and workshops introducing people to a meditational practice based on what the original Quakers found but modified to fit our current situation. To build on this seems to me to be one of the most hopeful ways forward in developing our spiritual life. If this kind of spiritual search were embraced by ever larger numbers, and if a lot more resources were put into supporting such a process, perhaps we could become more fully heirs to our Quaker heritage. Of course, there will never be one path that suits everyone. There can certainly be no imposing of a form of spiritual practice on meetings. Nevertheless there could be a strong movement developing organically among us, attracting more and more to join in, and enabling deep renewal in meetings.

Meeting as community

The community aspect of our lives as Quakers is inseparable from our spirituality, just as spirituality is inseparable from psychology. A good community offers acceptance, security, warmth, companionship and challenge, and we need all those things if we are to develop as fully as possible. If our meetings were to become deeper and closer communities, we would surely find our spiritual journey enriched and enlivened. We need to know each other in a more real way than we do, to be able to allow the more vulnerable parts of ourselves to be seen, and to trust one another enough to expose aspects of ourselves we feel ashamed of to one another, so that these can be worked with and integrated. We need to be stimulated, to have our assumptions and prejudices challenged. We need to be able to share our difficulties along the way and feel fully supported. We need to feel that we are journeying along with real companions, each on our own path but in close fellowship. This could begin to happen more and more if we had enough of the right encouragement and help.

The best description of spiritual community that I have encountered is in volume two of Patricia Loring's *Listening Spirituality*. She emphasises that a meeting that clings to safety will always remain a pseudo-community, because we can only be brought into deeper life by letting the Spirit (Light, Source, God) work deeply in us – and this involves taking risks. We need to learn to listen more deeply and attentively to each other and to our own inner source in order to gain a deeper connection with ourselves, with each other and with the divine. There can be no true community without this deep spiritual ground.

She emphasises that spiritual maturity can never be gained painlessly. The coming into awareness of our own brokenness and egoism is inevitably painful – but essential. She sees the difficulties that inevitably arise between people in a meeting as being particular opportunities for growth, as we see both our own and the other person's faults, and recognize our own need to change. Through such a process we can grow in humility and in love for one another, and find fuller self-acceptance. In this deep process there can be true mutual forgiveness, which she contrasts with the more superficial forgiveness that is granted from a moral high ground. And when individual members of a meeting grow in this way, she believes, growth in the community as a whole invariably results.

A meeting needs to be able to tell newcomers what its vision of community is – but it can only do so if it has such a vision. One way that meeting members can be helped to reach this depth of experience and this vision is to practise deep listening in small groups. Through the persistent

practice of such deep attentiveness, outward and inward, Patricia Loring believes that the individual member as well as the community can find continually renewed life.

I would love to see Listening Spirituality given real prominence from our central organisation. It could be adopted by Quaker Life as a specially recommended resource for meetings, with guidance on possible ways to use it; it could be adopted by our study centres as a basis for regular courses. Aiming to develop the community aspect of our meetings along the lines suggested by Patricia Loring could, over time, bring very significant change.

Peace and conflict

Patricia Loring's statement that conflicts can become the occasion for growth is borne out by others who have worked in the field of community relations and conflict resolution. A group of us in my meeting have studied Marshall Rosenberg's book 'Nonviolent Communication', and have discovered in the processes described a very powerful way of using empathy and compassion in order to resolve conflict. The Centre for Nonviolence that Marshall Rosenberg founded some decades ago now has links all over the world, produces many books and other material showing how Nonviolent Communication (NVC) can be used in all kinds of settings. It has been successfully used in situations ranging from estranged couples to warring street gangs and international conflicts. There are very moving transcripts of mediation sessions run by Rosenberg between Jews and Arabs in the Middle East and between internecine tribes in Africa. The NVC process involves taking full responsibility for one's feelings, seeing them as expressions of one's own unmet needs rather than as caused by the other person. Blame and criticism are removed and empathy for the other person is maintained. This is very hard to practise, but the experience of a few in my meeting who have tried it (as well as the experience of large numbers of people worldwide) confirms that it does work, does leave all concerned feeling satisfied, and can be a real time of growth because of a deep shift in the way that the issue is experienced by one or both parties. I don't know if Quaker Life and Quaker Peace and Social Witness have investigated NVC, but I think it is such a radical and powerful method of conflict resolution and peace-building that a peace organisation cannot afford to ignore it. I would like to see it actively promoted by our central bodies, giving meetings encouragement to study it and use it to resolve difficulties that arise between members, with training sessions being offered at study centres and, if possible, in meetings themselves as well.

Our theology

Also relevant to any consideration of our spirituality is our theological position. Most Quakers probably do not hold orthodox Christian beliefs – the divinity of Jesus, the virgin birth, the bodily resurrection – , but even so for many of us the life and teaching of Jesus is a deep well of inspiration. Some years ago in her Swarthmore Lecture 'Previous Convictions' Christine Trevett sounded a warning that we were drifting too far from our Christian roots and were at risk of losing our identity. She wanted the Society of Friends to tighten up its membership procedures and reverse the apparent open-door policy of recent years whereby people were being accepted into membership regardless of their religious adherence or lack of it. At the time I agreed with this. I had belonged to a church for many years before coming to Quakers, and although I eventually felt the need of a quieter, more inward form of worship, I continued, and still continue, to find Jesus's teachings, and the symbolism of his birth, death and resurrection, profoundly meaningful. And this will be true of many Quakers. But I no longer agree that we should try to make Quakerism more explicitly Christian again, and in fact have begun to wonder whether the official Christian link is really an essential part of what we are at all. Wouldn't we be being true to our roots if we trusted that the Light/Spirit/Source was available to us from inside without the need for theological underpinning, and regardless of what we call it? I believe our identity as Quakers would become stronger and more confident if we deepened our spiritual life through the kind of intense inward search that the early Quakers engaged in, and that is now being re-discovered among us, and that

this, more than a particular connection to one faith, is what would make our movement more cohesive.

However, the question of whether we should retain an official link with Christianity is one that would have major implications, both for ourselves and also for our relationship with the other churches and other faiths. At present we have a respected place among them. Wouldn't we lose that if we said we were not essentially a Christian body any more? And wouldn't a great many Quakers be deeply hurt, perhaps completely alienated? Such a step would need very deep consideration over a period of time - and we might decide after all that the Christian link is a necessary part of our identity.

On the other hand, for many of us, and for many of the population whom we would like to reach out to, Christ-centred language has become irrelevant or even alienating. Back in the seventeenth century Christianity was the accepted religion, and the Quaker founders were steeped in the teachings of the Bible and of Jesus in particular. So their Quaker faith was inevitably expressed in Christian terms. But we are not in the same position now. Our society has not just one faith but many. We have the interfaith movement which has powerfully shown just how much common ground the different religions share. The interfaith theologian Marcus Braybrooke has demonstrated the extremely close parallels between the main teachings of many faiths. Loving one's neighbour, loving one's enemy, valuing humility and peacemaking, searching oneself for one's own faults rather than criticising others - these are central messages within all the great faiths, and indeed in the lives of many people of no faith. They are evidently universal human aspirations. So should we still be singling out Christianity as being more 'Quaker' than the other faiths, just because we started out as Christian? I don't know the answer to this question, but as we continue to evolve I do think it is a question that needs to be asked.

A minimum theology?

One of the most illuminating texts I have ever read on the subject of theology is the outline of a minimum theology for Quakers by John Lampen which was printed in *The Friend*. In it he says that there is something beyond what we can know about through our minds and our senses; that the experience of this reality, which is sometimes called God, the Light, and so on, is essential to our well-being; it is the object and goal of worship, and if we follow its promptings we are led into lives that are whole and meaningful and courageous; when we at times experience it as absent, we are left forlorn and our lives lose direction; it does not matter what name, if any, we give to this reality, and it does not matter whether the members of a worshipping group have the same name for it. 'Our life-time's experience of this presence is like a journey during which we learn and grow... We encounter difficulty, disorientation, fear, loss and anguish at times on the journey, but fundamentally it is an experience of joy.'

This seems to me an excellent basis for a Quaker spirituality. Individual Quakers would probably always flesh out this minimum with the content of whichever faiths or philosophies were most meaningful to them. But if something like this core theology was given more prominence in Quaker materials and Quaker teaching, maybe we would gain a greater sense of direction theologically and gradually become both more unified and freer to evolve.

Helping to heal our society

We live in a society that has become progressively more individualistic, materialistic and cynical. There is little real leadership from successive governments over what should be the core values of our society. Instead governments, egged on by the tabloid press, have pandered to our more selfish instincts, encouraged us to make personal wealth our first priority, and have allowed the gap between the richest and the poorest to grow even wider. Research by the authors of 'The Spirit Level' has shown with absolute clarity that everyone gains in a more equal society, the wealthy as well as the poor. And this research is paralleled by a stream of studies about the effects of poverty

and exclusion. And yet the churches do not seem to be speaking out in any very powerful way on these issues, even though they do stand in solidarity with those who are marginalised, and give practical help. A re-energised Quaker movement could help give a lead among churches and faiths, as well as in society generally, in speaking truth to power with greater energy and passion.

A new name?

One change which might help us in our search for a clearer identity for ourselves, and also help us to reach out into the public and become better known, would be to change our name. Who, outside Quaker circles, has heard of The Religious Society of Friends? And wouldn't more people be put off by such a name than would be attracted? One member of my meeting used to see the name on the notice board outside a meeting house, long before he came into contact with Quakers, and assumed it was some weird sect. I would be surprised if that is not a common reaction to the name. Could we think of a name for ourselves that sounded as if it belonged in the twenty-first century? How about just calling ourselves The Quakers? At least most people have heard of Quakers, even if they don't know anything much about them, and at least it is not actively off-putting. Or perhaps some other, better name would come to us if we were to embark on considering a change.

Our resources

We already have a wealth of resources through which the deep changes outlined above could come. One major one is our study centres running excellent courses all through the year on a wide range of subjects. They already do so much to foster and encourage our spiritual life. But more needs to be happening in meetings themselves as well. For one thing, many people are not in a position to spend days away from home. Others do not have the motivation. What I think we need is far more tutors and workshop facilitators available to spend a day or a weekend or a few hours working with local or area meetings, maybe even over a series of occasions - like a greatly expanded Woodbrooke on the Road. If this happened, a far larger proportion of our membership would be reached. In my meeting, in an attempt to encourage attendance at courses, we have had a year of all such attendance being fully and automatically funded by the meeting, ie without having to apply to overseers or go through any other process. But there has been minimal take-up of this opportunity. We do need more to happen locally. Experience repeatedly shows that it is much easier to get most of the meeting involved in events and courses at a local level.

We also need a continuing supply of really stimulating study material that meetings can use, whether on their own or (even better, at least sometimes) with a trained facilitator. Perhaps Quaker Life and our study centres could organise more courses to give meeting members basic training in facilitation.

Quaker speak

I think we should urgently consider banishing all archaic Quaker language from our publications and procedures - language that belongs to the Quaker past but is meaningless to new attenders and which even long-established members sometimes struggle with. I know that some of us are deeply attached to Quaker usage, whether it is names such as Meeting for Sufferings or general words and expressions. But if we want to practise simplicity and be inclusive, then surely we should use plain modern language that everyone can understand. I do not think it is true, as is sometimes claimed, that modern English is unable to express everything we want to express as effectively as seventeenth century language. Enough inspiring books and articles are written in modern English to suggest that this is not so.

Quaker Faith and Practice, Advices and Queries

Among our resources Quaker Faith and Practice holds an honoured place. But although it contains many wonderful passages whose relevance is timeless, I think another major revision would be

useful. There are a lot of passages that now feel out-dated or uninspiring, which could be pruned to make way for new material.

Our Advices and Queries are not only read out in worship but the booklet is often given to enquirers and new attenders, as containing a summary of Quaker spirituality and values. Despite having gone through various revisions, the current version seems dated and tired. Could it not be radically re-written as part of the overall task of renewal? How about a process right across BYM with local meetings encouraged to start from scratch and produce a set of queries (possibly queries only, without advices), which they felt would help their own meeting and its members to grow? Meetings could then use their own list, revising it from time to time to keep it fresh, or all meetings could be asked to send their suggestions to a central group who would draw on them to form a new body of queries, or perhaps local meetings in each area could send their lists round to each other for cross-fertilisation. One good resource for meetings embarking on such an exercise would be the questions within each chapter of volumes one and two of Listening Spirituality. In one way or another, meetings could end up with a set of queries that would reach us at a deep level, and could be used in meeting for worship as well as in settings such as creative listening groups and for private reflection.

Our business meetings

If our business meetings are ever to become more than a minority interest, especially at area level, they will probably have to radically change their content and way of working, and their self-awareness.

Local business meetings could be enriched if they spent time focussing on their own process and discovering what the group dynamics are, in order to maximise participation. Most people not surprisingly find much more satisfaction in meetings where they play a full part, and might well be motivated to attend more often if the culture changed. We need to help one another to become more equal in this way, we need to help those of us who are unconfident and over-quiet to feel empowered, and those of us who speak too readily to become able to listen more.

We need to think also about which business really needs to come before the whole meeting and which could be dealt with in other ways. A lot could be delegated to small sub-groups of people with an interest in the particular subject, whether it be outreach, fund-raising, social events, or whatever, and trusted to with a certain amount of decision-making. For larger decisions, when the whole meeting needed to be involved, a subgroup could receive and consider suggestions from everyone else before bringing their recommendations or a set of options to the business meeting. Hopefully then a decision could be made in a more effective, time-efficient and satisfying way than is often the case.

The meeting as a whole benefits from this kind of arrangement, from not having to sit through long discussions, often with those present not having the particular information needed to make an informed judgement. And for those on the sub-group it can be a positively enjoyable and satisfying experience to work closely together, probably in the comfort of someone's home. In my own meeting we used this system recently to decide whether to replace our old benches with chairs. Since there were strong feelings on both sides of this question, it was important for everyone to be able to give their view, and this was mainly done off-line by giving suggestions to a sub-group, who obtained all the necessary information about the different options and about the cost of each. When the final decision was made in full session, although some people would still have liked a different outcome, it seemed that everyone felt able to accept what was decided because there had been a thorough enough process, and without the hours and hours spent in full session that would have been needed if we hadn't appointed a sub-group.

Perhaps an even more important aspect of the local business meeting is its spiritual content. If we could cut down on unnecessary time spent over practical decisions, we could devote a large proportion of the time available to our spiritual nurture, in whatever form. We could use worship-sharing on some relevant area, or use printed material to generate reflection. We could really work at developing our ability to listen more deeply.

Most of what happens at area meeting could also probably be dealt with in other ways. Reports, which make up so much of the agenda, could be taken out of AM entirely by including them in newsletters (as already happens in some cases) so that those interested could read them in their own time. Membership matters could be dealt with by the meetings concerned, and therefore by the people with a knowledge of the person. Small committees could be trusted to take on pieces of work. As with the local meeting, AM would then be free to use its time for spiritual enrichment and occasional important decision-making. More of us would almost certainly then want to take part. Perhaps AM could take on some of the role of General Meetings, which seem to have excellent content but are not convenient for most local Quakers to attend, being held at a greater distance and often lasting the whole day. Do we really need the fourth layer that is occupied by General Meeting? Could the work of this layer be more fruitfully integrated into that of transformed area meetings? Maybe such things have already happened in some parts of the country. If so, more communication could help beneficial changes to spread more widely.

Conclusion

Radical change cannot come overnight. But if we shake off aspects of the past that are hampering us, and give a high priority to spiritual renewal in all the ways at our disposal, we could regain much of the life and energy that characterised the early Quaker movement. We can be hopeful that this is really possible because many growing points are already visible: the Experiment with Light, Judy Clinton's work with Writing the Spirit, Appleseed, the Living Witness Project, Quaker Quest and Quaker Week, Hearts and Minds Prepared and the other excellent study courses that have been produced in recent years, the freeing of Meeting for Sufferings to focus more on spiritual matters, to name just some.

We could over time grow into a body in which members found the deepest spiritual fulfilment, and which contributed even more to society than at present. And as we evolved in this way, we should also be able to attract more people into our meetings from among the large sections of the population who are not religious in the narrow sense, but who do want to find deeper meaning in their lives, and for whom we would be a natural home.

Perhaps the above is a rather idealised picture of how things might be - but then we need a vision to travel towards. If we could become more open to the spirit of change and renewal in the coming years, we might find that transformation, personal and collective, was as possible for us as it was for the first Quakers.

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