

The Future of the Religious Society of Friends in Britain

A Spiritual Path for our Time

Part one – setting the agenda

1.1 Introduction

Take time to learn about other people's experience of the Light. Remember the importance of the Bible, the writings of Friends and all writings which reveal the ways of God. As you learn from others, can you in turn give freely from what you have gained? While respecting the experiences and opinions of others, do not be afraid to say what you have found and what you value. Appreciate that spiritual doubt and questioning can also lead to spiritual growth and to a greater awareness of the Light that is in us all. [1]

George Fox could find no one who could answer his questions, whose experience and opinion he could respect, yet in 1647 famously he heard a voice say to him:

There is One, even Christ Jesus who can speak to thy condition [2]

The consequences of this realisation were profound. He was not afraid to say what he had found and what he valued. In a passage from his Journal in 1648, he set out his manifesto:

I was glad that I was commanded to turn people to that Inward Light, Spirit and Grace, by which all might know their salvation and their way to God, even that divine Spirit which would lead them into all truth and which I infallibly knew would never deceive any. But with and by this divine Power and Spirit of God, and the Light of Jesus, I was to bring people off from all their own ways to Christ, the new and living Way; and from their churches, which men made and gathered, to the Church of God, the general assembly of heaven, which Christ is head of, and off from the world's teachers made by men, to learn of Christ, who is the Way, the Truth and the Life, of whom the Father said: 'This is my beloved Son, hear ye him'; and off from all the world's worships, to know the Sprit of Truth in the inward parts, and be led thereby, . . . [3]

What was he offering? A radical spirituality and a promise of where it might lead. In a time of uncertainty about the nature of religious authority his message resonated with other seekers of truth. By 1680 British Quakerism reached its numerical peak with about 66,000 Friends which represented 1 in every 130 of the general population.

1.2 Growth and decline

Today's membership figures present a very different picture. They suggest that the Society no longer resonates with seekers of truth, or fails to make itself known to those who might otherwise turn to it, or both. In the *Friends Quarterly*, in "The prize essays of 1859 and their impact on British Quakerism', A David Olver writes:

The latest statistics published by Britain Yearly Meeting present a sober picture. In 1965 there were 26,310 members and attenders, which represented about 1 in 2,000 of the UK population. At the end of 2007 there were 23,040 members and attenders (a decline of 12.5%) and this represents 1 in 2,600 of the UK population. [4]

Perhaps worse still, those who remain are an ageing population, such that in the next twenty years one might expect to see an even greater decline in its membership.

In 1941 when Thomas R Kelly wrote:

The light for which the world longs is already shining[5]

. . . he was asking: 'Is the Light still shining?' Today he might have asked: 'has the longing diminished?' Is the decline of the Society indicative of a spiritual degeneration?

If one looks at the growth say of Buddhism in the UK in the past twenty years clearly this is not the case. An example is the New Kadampa Tradition (NKT), which has its birthplace just two miles from Swarthmoor Hall in Cumbria. In 1992 when the NKT held its first summer festival, there were 200 people, mainly from the UK. It had 5 centres in the UK (8 worldwide). Seventeen years later, in 2009, the summer festival was attended by 6,000 people, gathered from a total of 1100 centres worldwide, with 47 in the UK, each with a number of branches. An estimated membership for the UK is 8,000 members.

From this we might conclude that the longing is intact – it is the places to which people are turning which are changing – away from traditional forms of religion and towards the new.

1.3 What can we learn from other spiritual traditions that are growing?

What is different about these new traditions, such as Buddhism, which are attractive to a contemporary seeker of truth? What does a tradition like the NKT offer?

- **A fresh approach to spirituality** reliance on an inner teacher rather than on outer forms of religion
- **Results** - an immediate difference and the expectation of an end result. Linked to this is the idea of the role of the individual as a participant in their own salvation.
- **An approach rooted in scripture**
- **Entry level sessions for newcomers** – leading to other structures and opportunities for spiritual development and worship
- **A spiritual community of like-minded people** searching for the truth, united in their wish to spread the good news and their efforts to maintain religious freedom for themselves and others
- **Young and energetic leaders** who exhibit spiritual confidence, power and fearlessness in their evangelism – all as a direct result of their own inner experience
- **A feeling of vibrancy and growth** – being part of something that will take you somewhere and is needed throughout the world
- **A spiritually focused organisation** – with energy directed toward the spreading of a message and the creation of an organisation to facilitate it
- **A lived practice** – the fruits of contemplation and meditation integrated in every aspect of daily life

Standing back from this list of characteristics one might ask:

Do they look familiar? Are there not striking parallels between the aspects listed above and the early Quakers?

To find such similarities would not be surprising given the context in which both flourished – at a time in which traditional forms of religion, their teachers and teachers were being questioned. We may also like to consider:

What about today, how many of these characteristics still apply to modern Quakers in Britain today?

Each of us will respond to the above based on our own experience as Quakers. We may feel some of the above are no longer relevant, or desirable. We may think there are so many extra things we now offer – which one would expect of a mature organisation – which don't appear on the list. However, what this analysis does show is that, to use a modern idiom, we've got what it takes – at the very least in our spiritual heritage. Also, If we are drawing parallels between today and the time in which our Society and its numbers were increasing, we may also like to bring to mind what it was in particular that so attracted those early seekers of truth.

Without a doubt it was the possibility of a direct and personal relationship with God. Startling in its simplicity. Open to everyone without exception. Merely requiring a habitual turning within (and a preparedness to change). Leading to a profound experience of the Light, or Christ or God. Which in turn becomes a touchstone, an experience of reality, or the truth that is the basis of all our actions – thoughts, words and deeds.

It seems to be an approach that is supremely relevant to people today, as it:

- Is content free
- Can be practiced by theists or non-theists
- Can be practiced by Christians or non-Christians
- Connects us with other spiritual seekers of the truth
- Is simple and profound – offering a direct route to God, to the truth. . .
- Creates a virtuous circle of a deepening faith – of personal transformation leading to inspiration and adoration, and a habitual turning to the Light
- Naturally leads from a focus on issues which concern the self, to others and the wider world

And crucially it also,

- Spontaneously gives rise to concerned action, for peace, justice, equality and so on.

So why is the membership of our Society declining?

1.4 What can we learn from what people in Britain who are non-Quakers say about us?

How do people perceive us? In *The Friend* on 18 November 2009 there was an article by Geoffrey Durham "Quaker": What does it mean to the outside world" In it he previews a 'proper scientific survey' which is being carried out to find out how Quakers are perceived in Britain. Those taking part in the survey will be asked 'What comes to mind when you hear the word Quaker?'. He says:

I know all sorts of Quakers who know all sorts of things, but I've never met a single one who has a clue what the word 'Quaker' means to people who aren't Quakers. . . .Can it really be that we aren't interested in what people know about us? Do we think it doesn't matter?" [6]

He writes about how helpful it will be in positioning Quaker Quest and so on. It would also be very helpful as we plan the next decade.

In the absence of his findings in preparation for this essay I carried out my own research, albeit with a very small sample. Asking non-Quakers about their knowledge of Quakers produced some consistent results. They included: people who are immersed in a spiritual life and have had some experience of attending Quaker meeting, and those who have no particular religious affiliation.

I have divided the responses into two different age categories 18-55, and 55+ because I found significant differences in understanding in the over-55's group.

Those aged from eighteen, to fifty-five described Quakers as:

- *Insular* (in the sense of being like a club with unspoken rules, rather than unaware of what's happening in the world)
- *Intimidating* (the spiritual seekers who attended meeting didn't know what was expected of them)
- *Unclear*, hesitant, or unable to voice their beliefs, views or practices
- *Unknown* (except for their work with respect to social concerns, for example through the work of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and Trusts, for which they were applauded, plus of course the image on the cereal packet).

The words of the younger group, if representative of their contemporaries, would explain why more young people are not drawn to the Society. They simply don't know what it is, or offers. Plus, those that have been drawn to it have found the experience intimidating and Quakers unclear and insular. On a more positive note, when the younger people asked what the Quakers are about, it seemed there was much that could be attractive to their age group. The eighteen year old said:

'People don't know about Quakers.

People of my age are not particularly religious but we do care about issues, such as the environment and world peace, the fact that Quakers are working towards these things shows they're in touch, it'd be a way of getting people.

Their 'don't tell ethos' (not proselytizing) could go against them. Maybe they could do some TV advertising and say 'come and work with Quakers', or on the internet – something catching our attention about an issue – which we'd see when we were browsing. Or use Quaker celebrities - people take note of them, like with 'Live Aid'.

People of my age get bored on their own, it's terrible, but I'd say some of my friends can't function unless they have friends over, those who want to discover themselves they might turn to Buddhism, maybe they could turn to the Quakers.

It's good they're open-minded but going to a Meeting where there were only old people would be a turn-off. If there were younger people you could look up to, say in their 20's, you could see them as an adult, but they'd be just older than you.'

Those who were older (fifty-five to eighty-one) said they knew little about Quakerism, but knew of Quakers through their works. They viewed Quakers as people who embody their beliefs – through their writings about controversial issues, their

approach to business and management, and their concerns with the evils of the world in which they exist. They contrasted this with other religions where people can take on the trappings of a faith but their lives do not demonstrate their beliefs.

What, in broad terms, does this tell us?

Firstly, we are known for our work in the world – in peace work, human rights and social reform. (Although, the fact that fewer people in the younger group knew about it would suggest we could do more to communicate what we do and involve young people in it).

Secondly, as neither group has grasped the spiritual life which underpins our work, this says something about what we offer, and how and where we communicate it. We invest significant resources in making a difference in the world, but what about addressing spiritual hunger?

1.5 A spiritual path for our time?

The Quaker Quest website has a strap line which says 'a spiritual path for our time'.

What is the Quaker path? What do we offer now? Beyond the Light practice and Meeting for Worship, for many Quakers and seekers what we then offer is a void. It is a void welcomed by some. One might suggest that the void is a very comfortable place for those who:

- a. are gifted to follow a devotional path, who have a profound faith and concentration, and/or
- b. have already been immersed in a particular religion. George Fox and his followers would have been well versed in scripture. Contemporary Quakers who perhaps come to the Society from say the Catholics, again may have experienced years of Bible study and spiritual teaching, contemplation, prayer and meditation

With respect to the first category one might ask: 'How many of us are like this?'
In our society today:

- faith is a difficult concept. We're not used to turning to and relying on an outer or inner spiritual guide.
- before we can commit to something we want to understand things with our heads, rather than just with our hearts
- our minds are more distracted than ever. It's hard for us to still our mind, turn it inwards and stay there.

With respect to the second category for some of those who have such a grounding the void is a welcome space. In *Quaker Faith and Practice* there is that lovely and very telling passage which says that Quaker Meeting provides:

. A space in a spiritual context. It is a process of liberation. [8]

It also brings to mind words by the modern theologian Paul Tillich:

'The decisive step to spiritual maturity is risking the break away from spiritual infancy with its protective traditions and guiding authorities. Without 'no' to authority, there is no maturity. This 'no' need not be rebellious, arrogant, or destructive. As long as it is so, it indicates immaturity by this very

attitude. The 'no' that leads to maturity can be, and basically always is experienced in anxiety, in discouragement in guilt feelings and despairing inner struggles. . . . Much must be left behind: early dreams, poetic imaginations, cherished legends, favoured doctrines, accustomed laws and ritual traditions. Some of them must be restored on a deeper level, some of them must be given up.' [9]

For such people it may still be helpful or desirable to have the support of others in Meeting and in Light groups as they grow in the Light.

What about those people who have a spiritual grounding who nevertheless may not be quite at the place described by Tillich? People who are certainly moving away from the old, but as it is being left behind are found wondering what is next. There is another text in *Quaker Faith and Practice* which says:

. . . . "Quakers are a bridge people'. . . . [10]

It may be worth considering how many people, especially younger people, we lose because we offer a bridge, but then apparently fail to offer any firm ground on the other side. So people turn elsewhere.

What if we don't have a spiritual grounding at all (and very few people do today)? There is a text in *Quaker Faith and Practice* which says:

. . . . it is significant that Fox, after justifying women's meetings by abundant quotation from scripture, concluded with the words, 'If there was no scripture. Christ is sufficient' [11]

If Fox were alive today perhaps he would say again Christ, or the Light is sufficient. His assertion is somewhat hard to put to the test because he and his followers had the 'raw material' of Christian scripture. Their experience of the Light acted as a catalyst enabling them to take it as personal advice. Scripture became illuminated. It helped them make sense of their experiences and lives:

'When Charles the second asked one of the first Quakers, 'How did you come to believe the Scriptures were true?' the answer was 'I have believed the Scriptures from a child to be a declaration of truth, when I had but a literal knowledge, education and tradition; but now I know the Scriptures to be true by the manifestations and operation of God fulfilling them in me' [12]

If what is being proposed is true, then in the 21st century, Christ or the Light may be sufficient, but for many not enough. We need to continue to offer the spiritual contexts - such as Meeting for Worship - which lead to a personal experience of the Light; and more beside - such as a grounding in Quaker theology - which together add up to a spiritual path for our time. This surely must be the main job of the next decade.

We also need to communicate our path, because as one interviewee said about Quakers "[we're] the best offer nobody knows about.". In reclaiming our spiritual core, we need to be careful the pendulum doesn't swing away from our track record of faith in action. Truly, we need to be mystics in the world.

In summary this part sets the priorities for the agenda of the next decade as follows:

Challenge number one:

Creating and delivering a spiritual path for our time

Challenge number two:

Communicating it

Challenge number three:

Developing and delivering our programme of witness, attuned to the issues of the 21st century

Challenge number four:

Recognising how we could sabotage our future

Part two – delivering the agenda for the next decade

Challenge number one

2.1 Creating and delivering a spiritual path for our time

What we need to do:

2.1.1 be clear about where our path might lead

What is a spiritual path? It is an internal path which leads to a spiritual destination. Are we clear about where our spiritual path leads, or might lead?

For early Quakers, turning to the Light leads to a state of holiness, as George Fox wrote:

So man and woman come again to God, and are renewed up into his image, righteousness and holiness by Christ, thereby they come up into the paradise of God, the state which man was in before he fell, and into a higher state than that, to sit down in Christ that never fell. [13]

It begins with a process of personal transformation and healing. Margaret Fell, describes the potential violence of this experience:

'Now Friends, deal plainly with yourselves, and let the eternal light search you . . . for this will deal plainly with you; it will rip you up, and lay you open. . . naked and bare before the Lord God from whom you cannot hide yourselves. . . Therefore give over deceiving of your souls.' [14]

In the process of transformation we receive the spiritual power we need to change, to become liberated from that which the Light reveals, and leads us to an experience of God. As George Fox says:

So the first step to peace is to stand still in the light – the light reveals whatever is opposed to it. And standing still there you will receive the power and strength to resist that part of you which the light has exposed. Because

this is where grace grows, where God alone is powerful, and where the unknown truth – unknown to the world out there – is revealed. The truth then liberates what has been held in prison, and in the course of time it revives it, leading it in time to the God who is beyond time. [15]

In a much longer passage by Francis Howgill, he ‘describes the sense of communion engendered among the early Friends’, it also says much about the place to which the Light leads:

God out of his everlasting love did appear unto us, according to the desire of our hearts, who longed after him; when we had turned aside from hireling-shepherds’ tents, we found him whom our souls loved: and God, out of his great love and great mercy, sent one unto us, a man of God, one of ten thousand, to instruct us in the way of God more perfectly; which testimony reached unto all our consciences and entered into the inmost part of our hearts, which drove us to a narrow search, and to a diligent inquisition concerning our state through the Light of Christ Jesus. The Lord of Heaven and earth we found to be near at hand, and, as we waited upon him in pure silence, our minds out of all things, his heavenly presence, appeared in our assemblies when there was no language, tongue nor speech from any creature

. . . . The Kingdom of heaven did gather us and catch us all in a net, and his heavenly power at one time drew many hundreds to land. We came to know a place to stand in and what to wait in: the Lord appeared daily to us, to our astonishment, amazement and great admiration, insomuch that we often said to one another with great joy of heart: ‘What, is the Kingdom of God come to be with men?’ [16]

There is so much in this passage. It speaks of some of the internal conditions (for example a longing for and a love of God) which are the basis for an experience of the Light and where it might lead. It also raises the theme of the Kingdom of God.

In John Lampen’s book *Wait in the Light* there is a section in which there are echoes the previous text, he writes:

In his interpretation of Jesus, George Fox seems to go back past the New Testament doctrine of the atonement (which is mainly found in the epistles and John’s gospel) to those traditions of Jesus’ teaching preserved in the synoptic gospels. There the theme is that the Kingdom of Heaven has now come. . . . It may be as hard to find and keep as a narrow path; or it may come on us as unexpectedly as a burglar. But when it presents itself, a man must grasp it and hold fast; once he has it, everything else he needs will follow. This teaching characterizes the early Quaker experience. But as we can see in the New Testament, the image of the Kingdom is replaced in early Christian teaching by the image of Christ crucified and risen. Instead of men being urged to seek the Kingdom within and actively co-operate in their own salvation, they are told to believe in the one sufficient sacrifice for the sins of the world; not only is faith enough, but nothing else is necessary. I think it would be fair to say that such a formulation awakes no echoes in early Friends’ experience, while the gospel of the Kingdom clearly did. [17]

When we reflect on what appear to be the destinations of the Quaker path it seems we have so much to offer people today:

In the short term it leads to a process of personal transformation.

One might ask how the self-help/personal growth industry in Britain today? How much money is spent on personal counselling and therapy? Not to dismiss or decry these things, yet here in our Society we have a process which countless people have proven to work, to work quickly and for its effects to last. (And as an added bonus it operates in such a way as to bring us close to the people who are travelling on a similar journey).

Ultimately it offers an experience of the Kingdom of God.

Focusing on the idea of the individual as an active co-participant in their salvation leading to a direct experience of God beyond time now.

The first step in creating and delivering a spiritual path for our time is to articulate where it might lead – its potential goal, or goals. The remaining steps offer some help as to how to get there.

2.1.2 explain where we can find a guide

When we enter into unknown territory, we want a guide to lead us to our chosen destination, or destinations. Turning to the Light connects us with our inner teacher, Christ, our guide.

2.1.3 provide a map

It also can be helpful to have a map that indicates landmarks, territories, different kinds of terrain, where to begin ones journey, well-travelled routes and so on - this can give confidence and inspiration.

Our map would show areas for exploration, based upon clusters of practices, ideas and experiences. For example the map could use the categories of Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre's 'Equipping for Ministry' course, which includes:

'The Evolving Tradition: the history of friends worldwide and the issues which face us in our claim that all of life is sacramental

Experience of the Spirit: topics such as prayer, worship, discernment, sources of inspiration and sources of authority

Engagement with the World: testimonies, witness and action; living our faith in today's world'

As indicated in section 1.5 in the 21st century this may be particularly important if people have not had a spiritual grounding (in scripture or spiritual practices). The lack of such a map may also explain the comments made by the people who said they found Quakers 'unclear', 'hesitant', and 'uncertain'.

The process of mapping would encourage us to put down some markers about the scope of beliefs encompassed by Quakers. This could include Christian views on God (theistic and non-theistic), on the Kingdom of God, the doctrine of atonement, aspects of Christ and so on. Also of other faiths, for example Buddhism, whose teachings may augment Christian thought, such as teachings on wisdom (ultimate truth), the development of universal love and compassion, and mindfulness.

It could lead to the further development of a set of contemporary commentaries to core Quaker texts and scripture (Christian and non-Christian); or books about Quaker theology, subsequent practices and processes; that could be used as the

basis for the development of course material, retreats, or personal study and meditation.

2.1.4 offer related courses and workshops pertaining to the map

Related to the map would be workshops, modules and courses covering topics such as:

- relaxation, settling the mind, concentration, mindfulness
- contemplation, meditation, prayer
- equanimity, love and compassion, joy
- truth, views of God, of eternal life
- aspects of Christ, the Light
- Quaker testimonies, witness and action
- faith expressed creatively
- Quaker history
- our processes – light groups, meeting for worship, worship sharing, business meetings, discernment, concerns, meetings for clearness, spiritual journal and epistle writing, and so on

The content of the courses, as indicated in the previous section would be Christian-centred, and reflect Quaker views, principles and practices, but they would also draw upon other traditions.

They would be developed and delivered as a result of both a *push* and a *pull*:

Push:

Just as with any map we may wish to offer some recommended routes. These could reflect our spiritual agenda, for example to bring more people to a personal experience of the Light and what it brings, and be designed for specific groups of people, such as our entry-level courses. They may encourage people to explore certain practices or views they would not otherwise consider.

Pull:

Workshops which are needs-driven, those which are requested by a group of individuals as they chart their course ahead.

Of course some would be a combination of both – such as the present ‘Equipping for Ministry’ course at Woodbrooke.

It would be very interesting to look at the present spread of courses offered at our centres for learning and study. To reflect upon which areas of the map are covered and those for which more detailed guides are not yet available.

In the next decade we need to develop further the good work already in place:

- **by offering courses which address the needs of everyone:** enquirers, attenders and members e.g. Quaker Quest
- **by delivering these things at a local level and offer flexibility** e.g. the new Becoming Friends programme
- **by running longer programmes which hold people in a learning space over time** in which a deepening experience can unfold e.g. Equipping for Ministry course at Woodbrooke

If the spiritual agenda is at the forefront of our concerns for the next decade then can we make sure at the same time that what we offer fits with the spiritual imperatives for the Society? This might entail adding to or making more flexible what is already offered. Below is a list of five possible areas:

a. Light work

If it always was and is a personal experience of the Light which creates spiritual momentum in our life and attracts others to the Society then we need to think creatively about how we can encourage people in our meetings across Britain and of all ages to experience this process.

For example:

Could we offer modular training: such as a series of weekly classes which could be taught at a local level? These could culminate, for those who wished, in the excellent weekend workshops currently offered.

The modules could cover:

- an experience of and teaching about each step in the process of working with the light, based on the words of early Friends and contemporary experiences of Friends
- an explanation of the internal and external conditions which support an experience of the light,
- an explanation of and an experience working with the light as an individual, for others, and for the world
- skills training in compassionate listening, concentration and mindfulness
- a description of the relationship between light groups, worship sharing groups and meeting for worship (I'll say more about how these might work together more flexibly in the section 2.1.5).

b. A sustained programme of courses, retreats and personal work based on Quaker theology/scripture

This refers back to the points made with respect to addressing the void in 1.5. and also in 2.1.3 'provide a map'. They could come out of the mapping process.

For example:

If we follow George Fox's example in taking Christ as the template for our life, what would we need to do or be so that like Christ we would be able to say with confidence "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life"? Such a programme could look at:

- **The Way of Christ** – developing our relationship with God through prayer and meditation, an understanding of scripture, a universal love and compassion, a life of witness
- **The Way of Truth** – developing our understanding and experience of God, or the truth
- **The Way of Life** – developing our understanding and practices, leading to an experience of the Kingdom of Heaven now

There is an important symmetry about the first and second areas of spiritual training being proposed– the former very much about a process and the latter more content rich - which together (from within the Society) would help provide the foundation and /or energy for delivering the areas of courses still to be covered, and the remaining challenges on the agenda (communication etc.).

c. Entry level courses

If we further promote ourselves as 'a spiritual path for our time' (this will be expanded in the next section) then one would hope we would attract many new people to the Society. We already have a number of courses for enquirers and attenders, such as Quaker Quest. As they evolve one might expect to see reflected in their design:

A change in orientation – as we run more courses and develop a better understanding of what attracts people to us (and the research being carried out by Quaker Quest will add to this) we can take those things as our starting point – relating our practices, our testimonies and so on to them. We can explain what we do from the perspective of helping people deal with the difficulties they face in life – how to relax, be peaceful, improve their relationships and so on.

An experience of Light work and Light groups – currently people get an experience of Meeting, we can also look at how we might give them an experience of the Light process and Light groups.

Following the tradition of threshing meetings held by early Friends we might also expect to see changes in where they are held and the form they take:

Going to the sorts of places where people would feel comfortable
It's interesting that the NKT has been able to develop so rapidly in part because it's been able to use Quaker Meeting houses. It may be as Quakers we need to use venues which are not associated with us – libraries, school halls, cafes etc..

Setting up targeted outreach activities – for example in university towns holding classes for students in colleges; or in areas where we have people with young families' mother-and-toddler groups. The development of such activities should be driven by what makes sense in a particular location and where there's the will to do it. The successful development of outreach for a particular target group could then be replicated elsewhere.

d. Courses in leadership and ministry

One of the characteristics of the NKT listed in section 1.2 (echoing the leadership of early Friends) was:

Young and energetic leaders who exhibited spiritual confidence, power and fearlessness in their evangelism – all as a direct result of their own inner experience

Growing an organisation in the 17th Century depended to a great extent on the energy of men and women. In the 21st century we have the disadvantage of an ageing Quaker population and declining membership. We do however have the advantage of technology and modern communications which we must use to help us (see section 2). However, this on its own will not be sufficient. We may need to encourage more people:

- to travel in the ministry
- to run workshops and courses (developing local people to deliver or support such activities, e.g. just as companions have been developed for the Becoming Friends course)

If we are to speak about the good news, about what the Quaker way offers, as our modern audience is a sophisticated one, we may need to provide training for people who feel led to do this work. It would be interesting to look at the development of a course that draws upon texts such as Samuel Bownas' book entitled *A Description of the Qualifications Necessary to a Gospel Minister*. The development of travelling ministers would also speak of the need to develop more scripturally-based Quaker courses and material for study, prayer and retreats.

Similarly, the success of our ministry and our marketing effort potentially will also lead to a demand for more leaders within the Society. Can we prepare for this and grow our own, based on a Quaker view of leadership and organisation? Such leadership development might also be attractive to non-Quaker organisations especially those in the voluntary sector, or those working to address social issues. This could be an additional source of income for Quaker providers of training and a means of outreach into the business community.

e. learning opportunities which enable us to understand the evils of our society

We have a duty to keep ourselves informed about the issues facing Britain and the wider world in which we live – in order to position the work of the Society and look at how best we might serve them. We can do this through reading, but also through lectures, seminars and working groups.

A final word in this section about courses before we move on to look our spiritual processes and structures, we also need to consider how can we monitor the development and delivery of these spiritual activities at different levels within the Society.

2.1.5 provide vehicles which propel us along our spiritual path

These are our processes and structures – what we might call: 'Quaker spiritual technology' - the vehicles by which we travel the various pathways to reach our spiritual destinations.

a. Our Light practice

If we were a business perhaps we'd say our Light practice was our USP (unique selling point). Fox called it 'a pearl' and 'hidden treasure'. Yet it was not a practice that was written down. It must have been communicated through discussion as early Friends met to wait in the Light and share their experiences. We can know this because of the way in which countless people were *convinced* by the Light and their lives transformed as a result.

It would also be true to say as a process it cannot be owned. We cannot say it is the invention of Fox, or the early Friends, or none since (although it was through Fox's own search for the truth that he knew the Light experimentally, and felt commanded to turn people to it - see 1.1 the quote from Fox's Journal 1648). As a result when we look at how we might communicate the process so that others might experience it, and be led to an experience of truth and love, we can approach our task with a sense of freedom.

What happens now? We know that Light work can be done for ourselves, for others and for the wider world, with the idea that:

- Light work undertaken by an individual *for oneself*, takes place and is processed primarily in a Light group (and then if there is more than one Light group running concurrently, in a larger worship sharing group).
- Light work undertaken by an individual *for others/ wider world* can be done in a Light group or in Meeting for worship.

Could it be the separation between individual work and Meeting for worship has been the reason why there has been in some cases tension between the work of Light groups and their local meeting or area meeting?

Would it be possible to introduce an additional hybrid/s, which would develop a closer connection between Meetings and Light groups?

For example:

Could individuals, use the spiritual environment of Meeting to do their own Light work? Once a month we could hold open, or closed Light groups which people could attend. This would provide a means by which people could describe their experiences and insights – which perhaps today we share only with a close spiritual friend. It would give those who feel unable to commit to joining a Light group, an opportunity to benefit from the experience.

We say in *Quaker Faith and Practice* that Meeting for worship is not about individual meditation. However, in the context of Meeting in which we join with others, is it not appropriate, from time to time, that we bring our own concerns into the Light in that environment? It must be said that our *Advices and Queries* point us in that very direction for example:

Take heed, dear Friends, to the promptings of love and truth in your hearts. Trust them, as the leadings of God, whose light shows us our darkness and brings us to new life. [18]

Come regularly to meeting for worship even when you are angry, depressed, tired or spiritually cold. In the silence ask for and accept the prayerful support of others joined with you in worship. Try to find a spiritual wholeness which encompasses suffering as well as thankfulness and joy. Prayer springing from a deep place in the heart, may bring healing and unity as nothing else can. Let meeting for worship nourish your whole life. [19]

If this is our hidden treasure, have we found it? If not how can we gain an experience of it ourselves? How can we make this practice widely available to others too?

It was the experience of the Light which drove Fox and his companions into the world to spread the good news – about an approach through which every individual could establish their own connection with the divine. If we are to offer a spiritual path for our time don't we need to do the same today?

b. Other Quaker processes and structures

These include:

- our meetings for worship and business
- our processes of discernment and clearness,
- our tradition of writing: epistles, spiritual journals and testimonies

In the next decade we need to avail ourselves fully of these different processes in our

repertoire. With respect to each we need to be clear about their function and where they can lead. Perhaps this is especially true with respect to Meeting for worship.

It was experience of Meeting which led some of the people consulted to describe Quakers as '*insular*' and '*unclear*'. Could we do more to give people some 'rules of thumb' with respect to participating in a Meeting? Such a document could explain:

- The sorts of things one should and shouldn't say. Generally we find out by experience – and in a Meeting where there is very little vocal ministry this can take a long time. It may be people today will not be prepared to come often enough to find out.
- The relationship between the individual and the collective in Meeting – this goes back to an earlier point about the validity of doing individual Light work during Meeting.

Challenge number two. 2.2 Communicating it

2.2.1 Speaking up

Section 1.4 featured a lengthy quote from the youngest person interviewed about Quakers. Our lack of communication was something he commented upon, he said:

Their 'don't tell' ethos (not proselytizing) could go against them. Maybe they could do some TV advertising and say 'come and work with Quakers', or on the internet – something catching our attention about an issue – which we'd see when we were browsing. Or use Quaker celebrities - people take note of them, like with 'Live Aid.'

We prefer not to speak about our spiritual path. If there were a poll of top ten favourite *Advices and Queries*, or texts from within them, surely one of the best-loved must be number 27:

*'Live adventurously. When choices arise, do you take the way that offers the fullest opportunity for the use of your gifts in the service of God and the community? **Let your life speak.**'* [20]

It was this aspect of Quakerism a lived faith, which differentiated Quakers from people of other sects or faiths, in the minds of the older group of people interviewed. It is an idea that inspires and challenges us all. It has its roots in the views of the early Quakers, in the section called Witness of Life in *Truth of the Heart*, in a translation of George Fox the text reads:

'Here's something for all of you who live in the light. . . .when people are contrary to the light and don't believe in it, when they know nothing of the word and won't be won over by the word, i.e. your speaking to them, then it's down to your pure way of life, i.e. your acting according to the light that comes from the word, to evoke the light to them, which they themselves have rejected and refused to follow. Your pure way of life might then show them what they are [21]

Then in the following text in the original:

'Keep out of the many words of the world, and take heed of a liberty of going into them, but keep in the power of the Lord God. . . . that your lives and

conversations may preach to all men, and adorn the truth of God, and speak in the hearts of men'. [22]

So people will be won over not by our words but by our lives – when we're acting according to the Light. This is very interesting because maybe at times we fall into the trap of interpreting Advice number 27 as 'make your life speak', rather than 'let your life speak'. We become concerned with and focus our bodily actions rather than the Light itself.

The second text also makes clear that letting our life speak doesn't preclude verbal actions. It does perhaps suggest a different way of speaking, which comes from a different place. In the section entitled 'Witness of Words' text number 30 says, again in translation:

'Be as patient as you need be, and let everything you say be seasoned with grace, so that it edifies people. And by speaking this way you will season the earth, you own hearts being established in the process, and you will be free from unsavoury ways of speaking, and unsavoury speakers, and you will live in the truth beyond their reach. [23]

Maybe we can view our anti-proselytizing stance as an orientation, a counter-balance against the tendency in so many religions to preach, rather than to be a living testimony of the Light of God.

One might also ask how does this explain the fact that George Fox and his companions, and many people since the time of the early Quakers, have felt compelled not just to speak but to preach? Is this not the same sort of evangelism we try to guard against? Not at all. Fox and others since engaged in:

- a different kind of evangelism – which is not about telling people what to believe or do, but about helping people gain a profound inner experience (of the truth/God/Light) for themselves. In other words explaining to people where to look.

And adopted:

- a different kind of a role/position of power as spiritual leaders – viewing themselves not as a stepping stone to God or the truth, but more of a conduit or catalyst through which people come to their own direct experience of it

It is interesting that in 1924 the Society decided to put an end to travelling ministers. And yet at the same time there is a text which says:

'the Quaker movement can only be true to itself by being a missionary movement' [24]

Maybe now is the time to reverse that decision.

Perhaps at this point it is also important to say something about language itself. George Fox was aware of the limitations of language in expressing truth, which can be known only through direct personal experience. At the same time if we are living in the Light, then we need not fear our words, however inadequate they may be. We do not need to be clever, or eloquent we just need to be true.

So we need to speak, to communicate, perhaps even to preach.

What should we say, how and where do we say it?

2.2.2 What should we say?

In general

As stated in section 1.3 it would seem that what we offer is what so many people in the world today are looking for. This could also be said of our testimonies or values which underpin the Society.

In particular

Additionally, specific pieces of communication will need to be tailored to fit the interests and needs of particular groups of people – for example geared to our entry level courses, such as Quaker Quest.

They could also focus on our work or people, for example:

- Our book of heroes and heroines
- Quaker celebrities and famous people
- Our track record of work in the world

It may also be useful (maybe electronically) to publish guides or documents which show where different kinds of activities take place throughout Britain, where young people are located (so we can refer other young people to those Meetings), or where there are Meetings attended by people with young families.

2.2.3 How would we say it?

We cannot avoid thinking here about the Quaker brand.

From a communication point-of-view a brand is usually made up of two components: how it sounds (called its tone-of-voice) and how it looks (known as the visual identity of a brand). So for a new brand one would start with the values or principles of an organisation and for each in turn consider what it might sound like and how it might be represented visually?

It can be helpful to go through this process from time to time. Not because an organisation's values have changed but because the context in which they are operating has. Decisions about a brand are not made in a vacuum, they need to take account of one's customers. For example if we want to appeal to a younger age group we need to sound and look at the very least contemporary – if not actually hip.

Our brand now:

What is so striking about the Quaker brand is its tone-of-voice. It has a measured, thoughtful, spare and warm sound – both written and spoken.

By contrast the visual aspect of the brand is weaker. Its logo presents a grainy appearance and in pastel colours seems rather tentative. Interestingly, even with respect to our visual objects, such as posters, we often choose to focus on words, rather than on images.

Refreshing our brand:

As we look ahead, it could be we need to stretch our brand voice to embrace the range of conversations we need to have. For example with the young, as well as sounding measured etc., we may want to sound confident, energetic and strong. We

may also need to expand our voice to reflect the differences in styles of communication one expects to hear across different communication channels, such as the internet, *facebook* and so on.

With respect to the visual identity of the brand could we do more to accommodate the people who have a preference to take in and process information visually or kinaesthetically? For example can we use more visual and kinaesthetic predicates in our written communications? Can we use more visual imagery in our communications?

Creating a new visual language:

It could also be that in a time in which people are used to very immediate and strong visual images, and fast moving text, we need to think about how we appeal especially to a younger audience. For example, is it time to revisit early Christian traditions of communicating through visual iconography rather than relying on communicating meaning through words?

A very exciting form of outreach could be to run a national competition for schools, colleges and universities which would be about creating a series of icons for our modern age. For example they could be expressive of the stages in the process of working with the Light. The icons would give the Society a new visual language and students would gain an experience of the process in order to be able to communicate it.

A final word on language

As an aside, reading the new version of *Quaker Faith and Practice* our voice is at its most confident when we are writing about our faith in practice and the most hesitant when we're speaking as contemporaries about matters of faith. This may in part be a result of the paucity of our modern spiritual language. How much fresher, more compelling and descriptive is the sacred language of the 17th century. For example, even a description of meeting for church affairs, at that time can move our hearts and minds:

Being orderly come together. . . proceed in the wisdom of God. . . .In gravity, patience, meekness, in unity and concord, submitting one to another in lowliness of heart. . . . in love, coolness, gentleness and dear unity' [25]

It speaks of the need for us to develop a modern sacred language which is just as evocative and compelling.

2.2.4 Where would we say it?

These points were raised earlier but perhaps should be reiterated here. We need to maximize our use of modern communications technology to let people know about the Society and what we offer. We need to use everything from print material (posters, flyers etc.), advertising, TV, PR, to the internet. Looking beyond our website to how we might catch the attention of people as they browse the net. For example through listings in social networks e.g. *facebook* or MySpace.

We may also like to think again about the kinds of opportunities our Meeting houses offer for outreach. A limitation may be that many are positioned slightly outside the main streets of our towns and cities. For those that aren't could we think about what our equivalent of Marks and Spencer's 'Simply Food' concept might be? Should we set up Q coffee bars, or tea houses? Is there a Quaker business with which we could

form a partnership? Alternatively, are there new ways in which we could use our Meeting houses for the benefit of our communities?

Challenge number three:

Developing and delivering our programme of witness, attuned to the issues of the 21st century

We have a track record of faith in action. In the next decade we need to re-position the work of the Society to reflect the core issues that face Britain and the wider world, such as those identified in a recent study by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF).

It has just completed a major project in which it has revisited modern day social evils in co-operation with its fellow Trusts, now published as *Contemporary Social Evils* (Policy Press 2009). The findings are organised under a series of headings: modernity and its challenges, the decline of community, individualism and greed, the lost culture and instinct of kindness, and also predicts the need to address issues as a result of global recession, climate change and demographic change. [26]

We can also understand how important our Light work and meeting for worship are as a foundation for our work in the world. We can see the testimonies of Friends through time not so much as a purely conscious response to social evil, but a spontaneous reaction, to the conditions they met.

We also need to put in place support for those people who engage in such work. In work inspired by faith, we often extend beyond what we would normally expect of ourselves – both in terms of our available energy and what we're able to accomplish.

We may also like to think about the opportunities our work creates to attract more young people to the Society. For example could we set up a scheme for gap year students, which would involve them in our work and our spiritual way of life?

Challenge number four:

Recognising how we could sabotage our future

There are a number of things we may wish to pay attention to, or bear in mind if we're not to sabotage our future, by:

- being careful as we put energy into developing the spiritual heart of the Society, we do not tread this path by neglecting the path of action.
- thinking because we say something, then it must be true. This is a common trap for organisations. For example, when say we have 'a spiritual path for our time' we certainly have the potential, but let us make sure we develop, deliver and communicate it.
- being unclear. We know how things work. Let's make sure they are transparent to others.
- being insular. We may be comfortable with the way things are, and see no need for change, but let's remind ourselves of our membership figures and

understand we need to if we're to safeguard our future. We may also find it difficult to let people who are new to the Society have a voice in its development.

- knowing we don't need to do everything at once.
- not making the mistake of putting too much energy into restructuring. We may feel it is important – and it could be argued to have a smaller centre with more activity at a local level would be beneficial. However, with limited resources we need to check which will have the bigger impact on our long-term viability – a new structure, or a campaign about what we offer spiritually?
- being aware of the age profile of our membership – as a result using the resources and opportunities we have wisely, such as through the use of technology.
- remembering where we began. The primary function of the Society must be a spiritual one. Its members united, as the early Quakers, by their spiritual hunger. Convinced, and compelled by their experience of heavenly joy into the world.

Let us end this essay end with some words from Henry T Hodgkin and heed his advice by bringing the Quaker message to others, making it ours in the 21st century, and offering 'a spiritual path for our time':

The very simple heart of the early Quaker message is needed as much today as it ever was. . .The really universal thing is a living experience. It is reached in various ways, and expressed in very different language. . .The common bond is God. Quakerism can only have a universal message if it brings men and women into this transforming knowledge. The early Friends certainly had this knowledge, and were the means of bringing many thousands of seekers into the way of discovery. In virtue of this central experience, the Quaker movement can only be true to itself by being a missionary movement. [27]

Footnotes

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