

## Stillness in Company: the Future of Quakers in Britain

*"Believe those who are seeking the truth. Doubt those who find it." Andre Gide.*

*"Truth is a pathless land." Jiddhu Krishnamurti.*

*"If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away." Henry David Thoreau.*

It was my first (and, so far, only) visit to Colthouse Meeting House, near Hawkshead in Cumbria. After meeting I strolled around the burial ground nearby and exchanged a few words with one of the Friends. "In thirty years", she said, sadly but matter-of-factly, as we looked at the rows of unmarked gravestones, "there won't be any Quakers left at all".

It was hard to argue with her. Whenever (and wherever) I go to meeting, I have the surreal feeling that, even at the age of 59, I am still part of some Quaker youth initiative. Though the attitudes on display are rooted firmly in the here and now, most of the hair I see is steely grey. As Friends die there seems to be no-one to take their place; at times meeting can seem like 'quiet hour' in a convalescent home. As we share the silence I'm aware that, unless the issue is addressed, and quickly, Quakers will slip quietly into folklore and no longer be a force in this world. Quakers survived the early years of religious intolerance; what might kill them off in the first century of the new millennium is not intolerance... but indifference.

**M**y qualifications for writing this essay are few. I'm not a 'proper' Quaker... just an attender. Worse, an attender with a rather poor attendance record. When I talk about Quakers I'm not even sure whether to say "them" or "us". Nevertheless, as an 'outsider', unrestrained by any vested interests, I hope I have a few insights to offer.

If my Quaker credentials are negligible, I'm on firmer ground with Samaritans, having been a listening volunteer for nearly 15 years. There are many parallels between the two organisations; they make a good fit. Without apology - and through design, not accident - they share a non-conformist attitude. Quakers and Samaritans go 'against the grain' of mainstream thinking and conventional wisdom. They're mild-mannered anarchists: people who - quietly but determinedly - march to a different drum.

Quakers see "that of God" in everyone; Samaritans, believing everyone should be heard, are witnesses to people's deepest and most difficult feelings. They both deal with marginalised people: prisoners, the mentally ill, the victims of abuse and violence, those who, for one reason or another, are weighed down by problems, who find life painful... perhaps even intolerable.

Despite having much to offer, both organisations are finding it hard to get their message across to the wider world. Here are two groups of people with a fiercely clear vision and a rightness of purpose, who nevertheless have a problem recruiting new members. Two

groups of people who, understanding the power of silence, and the value of listening as well as talking, feel uneasy about 'blowing their own trumpets'.

Quakers and Samaritans have approximately the same number of members in the UK. The entire membership of both organisations could fit into Old Trafford football ground, at the same time, with plenty of room to spare. Female members outnumber males, and the old outnumber the young. Both organisations, coincidentally, hold their annual gatherings on the campus of York University.

Quakers and Samaritans are known by sobriquets bestowed on them by others. For George Fox the moment came in 1650 when, standing in a courthouse dock, he faced a charge of blasphemy. "Justice Benn of Derby was the first that called us Quakers", Fox recalled later, "because I bid them tremble at the word of the lord". When the Reverend Chad Varah recruited volunteers to man the phone line in the crypt of his church - three centuries later, in 1953 - the *Daily Mail* dubbed them, predictably, 'The Good Samaritans'. Intriguingly, both names stuck. So Quakers are a religious group with a mildly pejorative name. And Samaritans, with no religious affiliations at all, is saddled - confusingly and unhelpfully - with a name straight out of the Bible.

Those who have heard of Quakers will probably recognise them as a religious grouping of peace-loving, trustworthy people (perhaps involved in the manufacture of breakfast cereals!). Those who have heard of Samaritans may recognise them (although quite wrongly...) as people who try to talk suicidal people out of killing themselves. Few people, I imagine, would know much more than that.

There are other similarities too. We feature in jokes, but we're seldom the butt of them; it would be pointless, heartless, like kicking the family dog. When we are thought of, by the public at large, we are thought of fondly. But implicit in that fondness is the suspicion that both organisations are rather out of date, peripheral to 21<sup>st</sup> century society. Quakers and Samaritans mean well, no doubt, but they seem to belong to the past, like snuff boxes and anti-macassars. On hearing the words 'Quakers' and 'Samaritans', many people will simply be surprised to find that they're still around.

**W**hat I like about Quakers I like a lot, though, admittedly, some of what I like is predicated on what Quakers *aren't*, rather than on what they *are*. They're not evangelical. They won't knock on your door, while the family's sitting down to dinner, to try and recruit you to their ranks. They won't look you in the eye, with the unblinking gaze of fanaticism, and claim to be the 'chosen ones'. They won't threaten you with eternal damnation if you don't share their faith or agree with everything they say.

With most religions you're polarised: you're either in or out, one of 'us' or one of 'them'; you're saved or damned, believer or infidel; you're going to heaven or you're going to hell. With Quakers it's not so clear-cut, and their natural inclination is to be inclusive. So if I say I'm a Quaker, then I *am* a Quaker; I don't have to flash a membership card or renew my subscription. There is no dogma, no creed, no list of arcane religious observances, no uniform, no forbidden foodstuffs. No-one has ever asked me to spell out my beliefs; no-one has enquired whether I have any beliefs at all. No-one has suggested that I might fall short of best Quaker practice. No-one, except me, has questioned my presence at meeting.

Is this attitude inclusive or just indecisive? Is it a recognition that no one faith has a monopoly on truth, or just a liberal, well-meaning, woolly-minded, Guardian-reading 'free for all'? If members are free to believe whatever they want, with little or no guidance from church elders, can Quakers truly be called a religion at all? And if not, does it matter?

I've never felt drawn to 'organised religions'. In fact, for most of my adult life, I've been repelled by them. Witnessing sectarian violence in Northern Ireland, hearing stories about paedophile priests, watching religion being used to justify wars and oppression, I wanted no part in it. Though unsure if the Church of England still represents 'the Tory party at prayer', there's little about a traditional church service that I can relate to. I can see the power in repetition, the rhythmical 'call and response' between minister and congregation, the solace to be found in familiar hymn tunes. There's a certain gravitas in ritual, liturgy and solemnity... lulling us into complacency, perhaps even subservience. But true spirituality, for me, is absent.

I don't believe that God resides in any particular building. And I simply can't relate to a God so needy and bereft of self-esteem that he must be praised without ceasing. Nor can I believe in a God who punishes mankind in perpetuity, because of a single transgression in the Garden of Eden. This is vengeance bordering on the psychotic; it makes no sense to me. It convinces me that man made God in his own image, not the other way round.

I don't know what form God might take, but nor do I want to convince myself that I do. I am certain only about my uncertainty! I have vague, unfocussed feelings that there is some kind of intelligence in the universe, but if I had to sum up my belief system in three short words, they would be these: *I don't know.*

In recent years we convinced ourselves that wisdom resides in the spiritual east, not in the secular west. 'Enlightenment' was our goal, whatever we imagined the word to mean. Never close at hand, it always seemed to require a journey... literally or metaphorically, or both. We sat at the feet of a guru, waiting for insight and instruction, hoping to climb the rungs of some spiritual ladder.

When people abandon organised religions they don't necessarily embrace a more rational approach, more's the pity. They're susceptible to superstitions and new age blandishments: a 'pick & mix' of spiritual banality. Charlatans and spiritual snake-oil salesman have never had it so good.

The spiritual landscape of this country is in a state of flux (perhaps it always has been!). We seem to be looking for meaning in our lives, with varying degrees of success. There's a big difference, however, between '*looking*' and '*looking for*'. When we look for our mislaid car-keys we are seeking a known quantity. Knowing what we're looking for, we can immediately discount anything that isn't key-shaped. Similarly, if we are looking for spiritual enlightenment, we may find something that seems to match our expectations... but it will be in the realm of what we already know. We only know we've found something because we recognise it.

But when we are simply *looking*, we are not constrained by the need to *find*. Saying "I don't know", honestly and openly, frees us up to new experiences. I'm not looking for the right answers; I'll happily settle, instead, for asking the right *questions*.

**B**y the age of 25 most of us have assembled a portfolio of beliefs and opinions, which, if left unchallenged, will last us a lifetime. We develop political affiliations; we may come to identify with a particular religion (most likely the one we grew up with) or reject religion altogether. Once our beliefs, opinions and, yes, prejudices are firmly in place, we have the intellectual wherewithal to meet every new situation with an appropriate response. We know where we stand on the pressing issues of the day, which cuts out a good deal of thinking and soul-searching.

We may be 'good people', regular church-goers, well-regarded members of society, etc, but at some point in our lives most of us stop looking and listening. We develop a coherent and consistent view of the world, and our place in it, precisely so that we don't need to 'waste' time and effort in looking afresh. Our beliefs are the only ones worth having, our opinions are those held by "all right-thinking people". We make sense of our lives, and our increasingly blinkered view, by being "right". Questioning our beliefs and opinions might make us doubt everything we hold dear... and then where would we be?

Our natural curiosity recedes, as the routines and responsibilities of everyday life take their toll. We're short of time (or, rather, we can find the time to watch East Enders, but not to look afresh at our surroundings!). Rethinking our cherished beliefs is a luxury we can no longer afford. We become complacent, as our beliefs and opinions ossify into unshakeable convictions. Whatever bolsters these opinions is gathered up; whatever challenges them is cast aside. We buy the newspaper that promotes our beliefs, opinions and prejudices; we choose our friends based on how closely their views coincide with ours. Our equilibrium is threatened by those who choose to live their lives in a different way. We don't want to discover anything new; we just want the opinions we have already to be confirmed.

At moments of doubt, we default to what we already know. We collude in the process of making ourselves more unhappy today than we were yesterday. The pattern is set. We become old... in attitude, if not in years. We stop looking; we stop listening; in the game of life, we're just 'playing out time'.

**I** gravitated towards Quakers (it's taken me a long time...) not because the theology matches my 'lifestyle' or my 'aspirations', but because theology is refreshingly absent. I didn't want to abandon one spiritual tradition, merely to embrace another. In short, I wasn't looking for a new affiliation, another -ism, another brand of religious experience. I didn't have a shopping list of spiritual requirements... hoping to find which major religion would come closest in meeting them all.

I like the Quaker insistence that we can all have a direct relationship with God - whoever or whatever we perceive God to be - without anyone interceding on our behalf. It's a thrillingly seditious notion, even now: to bypass the clergy and all the baggage of Church of England faith and practice. No wonder Quakers were persecuted, 350 years ago, for trying to undermine the chain of command in the religious life of this country.

In my secular life I consider myself to be a 'citizen', not a 'subject'. Similarly, during my devotions, I don't want to be considered part of a 'flock' (I've seen the way sheep behave!) and I don't want to be 'led' by a shepherd... however well-intentioned he, or she, might be. The teacher/pupil, guru/acolyte relationship strikes me as essentially juvenile in nature,

requiring us to submit to an authority figure instead of figuring things out for ourselves. Taking personal responsibility for our spiritual lives seems like the 'grown up' option.

I don't want to be blackmailed into belief by being offered rewards in the next life to compensate for all the misery we encounter in this one. I don't want to make the big decisions in life based on guilt or fear. I don't want to conform. In short, I don't want anyone (not even Quakers!) telling me how I should conduct my life.

I like the conciliatory approach to resolving conflicts: by listening and learning, rather than just banging a fist ever more loudly on the table. The clashing of mighty egos, in our adversarial system of politics, creates a lot of heat, but not much light. I already know what happens when a probing interviewer meets an evasive politician: the result, more often than not, is an unrevealing stalemate. The Quaker way of reaching consensus seems sane and persuasive by comparison.

I like the appeal to logic rather than fantasy. We talk about 'cold logic'... but logic is 'cold' only when contrasted with the warm, fuzzy, indeterminate feelings we get from a fairy-tale and its 'happy ever afters'. I don't need a spiritual 'comfort blanket'; I can handle a degree of intellectual rigour. I like the fact that Quakerism offers no easy answers, and does not dodge the difficult questions.

I like informality, including the idea that I don't have to get dressed up in my 'Sunday best' (whatever that might mean!) when I go to meeting. I like plainness, modesty and simplicity - attested by the unadorned meeting houses and the simple gravestones - rather than decoration for its own sake. This outward expression of an inner conviction is probably what first drew me to Quakers: providing a blank canvas on which individuals can project their own thoughts and insights.

I felt the contrast between a meeting house and, say, one of our great churches. York Minster, for example, is huge, awe-inspiring and magnificent: a building of architectural superlatives. But somehow it seems to be dedicated more to the glory of man, and man's way with towering masonry, than to the glory of God. The minster is monumental but showy, sublime yet fussy; it's a spiritual skyscraper. I can't really argue with the millions of visitors who are moved to tears by the splendour of the minster; I can only say that the magic has never quite worked on me. I can *appreciate* the soaring architecture, but it doesn't *move* me like Brigflatts meeting house does. The minster I can admire, but at Brigflatts I feel at home.

Quakers are a community, not a building, and Brigflatts meeting house has a more modest agenda. With its compact dimensions and white-washed exterior, it sits unobtrusively next to other examples of 17th century vernacular architecture. It doesn't make you go "Wow!". It doesn't make you dizzy with its vertiginous height; it doesn't dazzle you with stained glass or vaulting. It represents an inner impulse, not an outward 'show'. Silence is what Brigflatts is all about. You can feel it in the very fabric of the building, whether people are there or not.

The entrance porch bears a datestone - 1675 - a time when non-conformist meetings were still illegal. Building a meeting house at this time was a defiant act of faith, punishable by imprisonment. The Act of Toleration was still 14 long years away. Toleration: what a strange concept that is. We tolerate a head-cold; we tolerate a noisy neighbour. But the

idea of tolerating someone else's religious faith (ie by not throwing them in prison) seems such a meagre ambition. We should be *celebrating* the differences between us, not just tolerating them. Be that as it may, the act did allow Quakers, and other non-conformists, to worship in their own fashion, without fear of persecution.

I like Quaker meetings, and the fact that they don't start when a man with a loud voice and colourful robes decrees it. Meeting starts - intriguingly, beguilingly, logically - when the first arrival sits down. And I like the silence. This pool of silence, this waiting, this act of listening, is where Quakers and Samaritans meet and find a common purpose.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we have an ambivalent attitude to silence. In radio, where it's known as 'dead air', silence is regarded as an unforgivable lapse of broadcasting etiquette. The two-minute silence at the Cenotaph every November remains a powerful invocation of shared emotions, memories and allegiances, though its translation to football matches has been less successful. Trying to impose silence on a volatile crowd can only ever invite dissent. Commentators and pundits wait for someone to interrupt the silence; they're seldom disappointed. So, in recent years, the silence has been largely replaced by applause, which is less easy to sabotage: a pragmatic, sensible solution.

Ours is a noisy world, in which people have to shout to be heard above the din; the result, predictably, is cacophony. So we either have to shout even louder, or stop shouting altogether. A communal silence, willingly shared, is of a different order. No-one welcomes silence who has an ideology to espouse, an opinion to air or a team to support. In a society where we have notoriously short spans of attention, the idea of sitting in silence for an hour might seem perverse. In a results-driven world, with targets to be met and time always pressing, silence may seem self-indulgent, unproductive. What's the point?

Samaritans stress the importance of listening. *Active* listening. Not listening... and then acting. Or listening... and then looking for solutions. The act of listening is, in and of itself, an immensely powerful tool in communication and understanding.

I remember giving a talk about listening skills to a group of counsellors, who seemed troubled by my insistence on the importance of active listening. "We understand that Samaritans listen", they said, "but what happens *next*?" Listening, they implied, is fine, up to a point, but what people need after that is practical help with solving their problems.

So I made a list of the benefits of being listened to, and here's what I came up with.

When we listen actively to people...

1 They know we've heard them.

2 They know we've understood what they're saying.

3 They know we are not judging them.

4 They know we accept them - and their concerns - for what they are. We validate their feelings. What they say *matters*.

- 5 They know we're not shocked - by their language, or their thoughts, or their behaviour.
- 6 They know we won't belittle their problems by trying to find simplistic solutions (which is what everybody else does).
- 7 They know that what they say will be treated in total confidence.
- 8 They know they've had a witness to their deepest, most powerful feelings.
- 9 They know that we will carry on listening even if what we hear make us feel uncomfortable.
- 10 They know we won't try to make them do something they don't want to do... or stop them doing something they have decided to do. That's because we respect a person's right to make their own decisions, even if that means taking their own life.

Then I thought about Quakers. Not the peace initiatives or the conflict resolution or the social responsibility, because, well, the value of such work should be self-evident. I mean the silence and the stillness: aspects of Quaker life which some people might see as less important. As Samaritans talk about *active listening*, Quakers think of *silent witnessing* as being at the heart of their spirituality.

So what *are* the tangible benefits of silence?

- 1 A silence willingly shared can be a powerful experience. Everyone at meeting has *chosen* silence...
- 2 Silence can be *entered*... it cannot be *imposed*...
- 3 Silence, being informal, acknowledges that no-one is 'in charge' of the meeting, leading it in any particular direction...
- 4 In stillness there is no expectation...
- 5 While emphasising our shared humanity and respect for one another, silence allows everyone to have their own thoughts and feelings, to 'worship' or contemplate in the way that has most meaning for *them*...
- 6 Being unprogrammed, silent worship can offer a glimpse of something genuinely *new*... not just the repetition of familiar hymns and prayers and mantras. Silence intimates that we are open to new experiences.
- 7 Silence allows us to step back from the din of the world - and the endless chatter of our own thoughts, desires and hates, our opinions and interpretations - and simply *be*.
- 8 Silence creates a space which does not have to be filled.
- 9 Silence prepares us for prayer, worship, attention, action.

10 In silence we can see ourselves as who we really *are*... not as we would wish ourselves to be...

The act of sitting in silence suggests a willingness to listen as well as talk, to take in as well as give out: a convincing template for dealing with conflict and inter-personal problems. As William Penn wrote: "True silence is... to the Spirit what sleep is to the body: nourishment and refreshment." Silence, like listening, is good in itself, not just as a means to an end. Silence was a radical notion 350 years ago, and, in a world where we're dizzy with facts and figures, targets and solutions, it still is.

**D**o Quakers *have* a future in Britain? The numbers, baldly stated, are not encouraging, though Quakers have survived thus far without having become 'populist' or jumping on every passing bandwagon. Their influence has been - and remains - far greater than numbers alone might suggest. But Quakers have no divine right to continue at all. History is littered with casualties: religions, organisations and professions which, having failed to meet the needs of a sufficient number of people, have either imploded into rancorous factions or just fallen by the wayside. We can lament the demise of blacksmiths, thatchers and chimney sweeps, for example, but there's little we can do when their particular skills are no longer in demand. Post-Darwin, we look for the fittest to survive. If Quakers go the way of the dodo and the passenger pigeon, then maybe that was meant to be. It could even be argued that, in terms of longevity, Quakers have already exceeded expectations.

The history of Quakerism is fascinating, not least because so much written material is still available to study. England in 1652 is both relatively recent - in a religious timeframe - and yet, at the same time, achingly distant. George Fox's words still resonate strongly, across the centuries, with the rich cadence and fervent delivery of 17<sup>th</sup> century language. We can respond to Fox's vision, his energy, his willingness to put himself in harm's way. He must have been a charismatic man, an inspirational speaker. I appreciate many of George Fox's original observations (and, I will admit, the archaic language in which they are expressed), such as acknowledging "that of God" in everyone.

Light is the metaphor that was repeatedly and specifically chosen by Fox to represent spiritual awakening and our relationship with God. "The first step to peace", he said, "is to stand still in the Light". As a landscape photographer, accustomed to being "guided by the light", I can readily identify with his use of light as a symbol. And it's more than a symbol, standing in for something else; it's a glorious reality.

It's inspiring to read about the life and times of Fox and other early Quakers. It's humbling to read about their travails, at a time when religious non-conformity was, literally, a matter of life or death. Fox and his followers served many prison terms - on charges that included blasphemy, disrupting church services, and refusing to swear an oath or pay tithes.

In the aftermath of the Civil War - the English Revolution - Quakers tapped into people's resentment towards religious and political authority. After eight years of conflict this was a clarion call to religious freedom and self-determination. Quakers - and other non-conformists - threatened the authority of both church and state.

The spiritual lives of these early Quakers were passionate; it's hard for us, in this secular century, to imagine what it was like to live at a time when church attendance was mandatory. Hard, too, to imagine going to prison for our beliefs, which was the lot of many



Quakers. A few died in prison; some emigrated or were banished to the colonies; all suffered persecution of one kind or another. In 1689, two years before the death of George Fox, the Act of Toleration was passed. Quakers - and other non-conformists groups - were now free to meet and worship in the way they chose.

Quaker history can be either a help or a hindrance - buoying us up, or weighing us down - depending on how much store we set by it. It's always good to know where we came from - individually and collectively - though by placing too much emphasis on the past we may only be confirming the uncertainty of our future. We don't want Quakers to end up as a footnote in the history books, just another side-show in 'theme park' Britain.

Quaker values are timeless: as relevant now as at any time in our history. Yet within a few years the collected wisdom of Quakers might be lost... along with our distinctive voice and liberal attitudes. It would be immensely sad if Quakers were absorbed into the heritage industry, leaving a handful of characterful buildings, and the '1652' tour of significant sites, as the only reminders of what Quakers used to be.

As Samaritans have discovered, staying 'up to date' is an ongoing issue for any organisation with essentially timeless values. What's 'cutting edge' today will be seen as laughably old-fashioned tomorrow. The challenge for any organisation is to remain relevant to today's society without abandoning its core values.

Samaritans have recently gone through a period of soul-searching and re-branding: a process that Quakers, for all I know, may already be embarked upon. Re-branding is a contentious issue, of course. It's what we do to tubes of toothpaste and tins of baked beans; even to consider re-branding a religious grouping like Quakers seems trivial and superficial. To say it doesn't matter is naive; to think it's *all* that matters is to be caught up in the language - and preening self-regard - of the marketing men, and I'm sure we don't want that either.

For people who think deeply about the issues that matter most, the idea of re-branding can look like the antithesis of everything they stand for. But staying up to date is also about perception. Samaritans don't exist in a vacuum. If the world at large understands who Samaritans are, and what we do, then the organisation continues to be viable and valuable. If we don't connect with the wider world, we will quickly become out-dated and irrelevant.

For their re-branding exercise Samaritans were fortunate to engage with a prominent London agency who, admiring what we stood for, gave their time and expertise for free. Imagining what the future might hold for Samaritans, they were asked to think the unthinkable and rule nothing out. Even the name of the organisation itself was 'up for grabs': a leap of imagination that is often too difficult for those inside an organisation to contemplate. It was an opportunity to unhitch the organisation from a misleading name... and choose one with no religious connotations whatsoever. It was decided, eventually, to retain the name 'Samaritans', because of the high recognition factor in the public's consciousness (perhaps all those jokes have paid off!), but many other changes were implemented, mostly successfully, some painfully.

When Chad Varah founded the organisation, in 1953, Samaritans was the first (and, for a few years, the *only*) telephone helpline. Now there are hundreds, mostly aimed at specific

sectors of society: children, people in debt, victims of rape and abuse, etc. The rebranding exercise gave us the opportunity to stop and, with help, take a long, hard look at ourselves. It can be difficult for any group of people to embrace radical change, especially when those people are as conservative (with a small 'c') as Samaritans. "We've always done things this way" is the usual complaint, "Why change now?" Why indeed. Samaritans spend so much time listening that when they start talking they sometimes find it hard to stop!

We lost a few members during the re-branding exercise, and gained others. Most importantly, perhaps, we ensured that the organisation would survive, thrive and continue to help those who needed us most.

I get the feeling that Quakers are in a similar position to where Samaritans were, a few years ago: needing to ask some searching and uncomfortable questions about who we are, what we do and what the future might hold.

Quakers may actually be in a more fortunate position than Samaritans, having already created a template, over the years, for dealing with contentious issues in a rational, non-confrontational way. Quakers offer a convincing vision of how life could be if we stopped our antagonistic, adversarial ways and looked instead at the way we live our lives. There is also enough humility, I hope, to understand that now is the time to think and act... or sit back and watch the movement ebb quietly away, like water into sand. It's time to think the unthinkable: to look hard at the possibility of radical change. Not a cosmetic 'make-over', which only tinkers at the edges, but a radical overhaul.

**M**y vision for the future of Quakers is bound up in this: life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with its fleeting pleasures, moments of happiness, laced with regrets, promise unfulfilled and vague feelings of dissatisfaction. This seems to be the typical trajectory of so many people's lives: disappointing, yet not quite tragic. We live aspirational lives. We write scripts for ourselves, and judge the success or failure of any project by how closely the outcome matches the script. I see Quakers as demonstrating what can be achieved when we live our lives *unscripted*. What we have to offer is not a set of rules to live by but an *attitude*: an attitude that informs every aspect of our lives, from the minutiae of our everyday existence to the 'peak experiences'.

I want Quakers to be a spiritual home for people like me, who don't identify with any of the major religious groupings. People who prefer to live with a spirit of inquiry, who can admit that they don't know the answer to the big questions we insist on asking. People who don't want to settle for one set of comforting myths or another. People who can look, without necessarily having to find. People who would rather ask difficult questions than settle for easy answers. People who are looking for greater simplicity in their lives. People who understand that so-called 'enlightenment' is living in the here and now, rather than climbing the rungs of some spiritual ladder. People who don't want to have to shout above the din to have their voices heard. People who suspect that the 'meaning of life' is not to be found in some static, monolithic belief system, or words written on tablets of stone, but in diving into the river of life and going with the flow.

I would like the meeting house to be a home and a haven for independent thinkers, dissenters, non-conformists: the awkward squad, in a nutshell. People mature enough to know there are always other faiths, other points of view, other - equally valid - opinions.

People who can celebrate the differences between us as well as emphasising our common humanity. People who know that religious experience is not confined to a particular consecrated building; all places are holy, or no place is. I want Quakers to be a living, breathing proof that people can hold different beliefs and yet still live in harmony together... so that we can be ourselves, not pressed into a mould called 'Quakers'.

I don't see Quakers as a think tank, or a 'talking shop', or a campaigning organisation. We have enough of them already, lobbying parliament on this issue or that. There's pressure, at the moment, for Samaritans to adopt a position on the contentious subject of assisted suicide. There's a discussion to be had, of course, about suicide in general and assisted suicide in particular. But the role of Samaritans is to *listen*... rather than lobbying on a single issue. Similarly, with Quakers, it seems more important to stress our *attitude* than voice our opinions on the pressing issues of the day. If our attitude is *right*, then right actions will follow. If the attitude is *wrong*, then everything that follows will be wrong too. The moment we take an inflexible position on any contentious issue is the moment we stop listening, learning, reacting, responding.

I see an affiliation of people whose one defining characteristic is their willingness to look and listen, with faith (if they *have* a faith) that comes not from dogma but from stillness and sincere enquiry. People who embrace uncertainty, and won't accept hand-me-downs from any religious authorities, however persuasive they may seem. People who don't look out, from the firm foundations of what they know... but who stand on less firm ground, without certainty, facing the unknown.

Having stressed the need to bring Quakers up to date, I'd like, in one respect, at least, to go 'back to basics'. I'd like to see Quakers reinvented as 'seekers', finally acknowledging what we already know... that people who identify - and ally themselves - with Quakerism hold many different beliefs (and, for some, no beliefs at all). If people aren't sure what Quakers stand for, then let's not invent something that sounds vaguely plausible. I can't see any point in trying to encapsulate what Quakers believe into any kind of creed; there's no form of words that would sum up such a wide range of experiences. Let's be unapologetic about our diversity.

I understand that we all have different points of view. The challenge is to recognise our differences... and reconcile them. Not with some half-hearted inter-faith initiative, or tolerance (a 'gritted-teeth' kind of acceptance, at best), but a genuine realisation that truth knows no boundaries and is not constrained within one single faith, doctrine or tradition.

Tolerance was extended to Quakers back in 1686, but surely we can do better than that. I don't necessarily want to spend time studying other religious traditions; it may be enough to acknowledge everyone's right to worship in the way they see fit. Of course, Quakers only seem like non-conformists when viewed from within another - perhaps more 'conservative' - religious tradition. For me, with an outsider's taste for the 'road less travelled', the Quaker way seems perfectly natural.

I would like Quakers to build on the strengths they already have: being tolerant, mindful, 'honest brokers', synonymous with fair dealing, utilising their remarkable ability to reach consensus without confrontation. Social justice, peace initiatives, reconciliation, conflict resolution, and other forms of activism... all grounded in the silent worship of the meeting.

We need more investment into sane, simple and sustainable ways of living. I hope that Quakers will continue to shine as beacons in the gloom - not out of pride, but humility.

We should continue to act as a brake on greed, profligacy and waste, rampant consumerism and conspicuous consumption. We can be a bulwark against both fundamentalism and the tide of trivia that threatens to overwhelm us. In a world where so many important issues are reduced to a mirthless joke, Quakers can continue to address the causes that *matter*...

A good reputation is hard to win, but easy to lose. So Quakers should continue to be independent... in thought and prayer and in the way they are constituted. In a world of lies, half-truths, pragmatism, spin and self-interest, there's never been a greater need for straight talking. When a Quaker speaks, I want his "yea to be yea and his nay to be nay", as was said of George Fox.

**B**ig changes to Quakers? I don't think so. Primarily I would review the way that Quakers present themselves to the world. What needs to change, I feel, are the ways in which these ideas are expressed. While some Quaker activities are undeniably sound, the language can come across as quaint, or, worse, anachronistic. It sometimes seems that Quakers are preparing themselves for the time when the entire movement is nothing more than a museum piece. People will be curious to discover what Quakers *were*... rather than what they *are*.

We need to remove the barriers that may make people reluctant to engage with Quakers. Beginning with the word 'Quakers' itself. Is this still the name we wish to be known by? Could this be the right time to drop the word 'Quakers' altogether, and become, simply, 'Friends'?

The historical associations may ground many Quakers in the movement's past, but what might uncommitted people think about 'yearly meeting' or 'meeting for sufferings', or 'ministry'? Some of the language used by Quakers is off-putting, self-limiting and archaic. While we don't need to 'dumb down', we could perhaps find words that would resonate more clearly with people who haven't been brought up within the Quaker tradition.

The literature we produce is profuse and well-meaning: sometimes interesting, but often a bit dull. For an organisation that has little doctrine, we seem to have a lot to say... and we can take a very long time in saying it! The magazines may meet immediate needs, but do they persuade uncommitted people to look closer at the Quaker way of life?

We need to be more open to newcomers, to stem the decline in our numbers. Years ago, before I became a volunteer, I used to walk past a branch of Samaritans every working day. On each occasion I promised myself I would knock on the door some day and enquire about becoming a volunteer. I never did. Though small - just a terraced house - the building had a rather forbidding air. There was nothing to suggest that casual visitors were welcome. The message, though unspoken, was clear: "There's important stuff going on in here, but none of it concerns *you*".

A few years later, having moved to another town, I saw an advert in the local paper. Samaritans were having an open evening. This is what I'd been waiting for: an explicit invitation to learn more about becoming a volunteer.

I wonder how many people walk past a meeting house, mildly curious about what goes on inside, but never taking the opportunity to find out. While we may consider ourselves warm and welcoming, let's take a dispassionate look at ourselves through the eyes of someone coming to meeting for the first time. Are we really doing enough to make newcomers feel welcome? While there is nothing to stop anyone attending meeting, is there anything in particular to *attract* them? How do we appear to someone looking in, literally or metaphorically? Like a members-only club? Or, worse, a cult?

Are we making the most of meeting? Are there things we do for no other reason than we've always done them? Are we wasting the opportunities offered by having a group of like-minded people gathered together? For example, the notices at the end of meeting often seem like an unnecessary chore: parochial at best, irrelevant at worst. They may be of only limited interest to locals, and of no interest at all to outsiders. Is reading out a list of notices really the best way to conclude an hour of silence?

Unfortunately, for whatever reason, fewer people seem to be finding their way to meeting. There's a quantifiable difference between modesty and diffidence; if we have something worthwhile to offer, then, simply, we should be telling more people about it. Meeting - though open, in theory, to all-comers - remains a well-kept secret.

I went to meeting recently: not in some tiny meeting house, tucked away down a country lane, but in the middle of a Northern town. The main door of the meeting house was shut, with nothing to suggest when it would be opening again. A visitor might conclude the building was closed for the winter. It was only when I walked around the building that I discovered another way in: a way that only the locals would know.

Inside I found a group of people, mostly in their seventies, or older. Now, I hope I'm not ageist (being no 'spring chicken' myself...), but here was a group of elderly people sharing an hour of silence, listening to notices then having a cup of tea and a chat. An air of defeated inevitability hung over the meeting: a tacit acknowledgement that the meeting itself was on borrowed time and, worse, that nothing could be done to reverse the decline. I got the distinct feeling that this group of Quakers would prefer to settle for a quiet and dignified end to the meeting rather than contemplate radical change.

I don't mean to be critical of the meeting, or the friendly people I met there; this is just a reasonably objective observation by someone thinking about the future of Quakers. Once the average age of a meeting rises past 60, 65, 70 and beyond, we reach a 'tipping point'... when I can think of no circumstances that might encourage younger - and more energised - people to swell the numbers. I know there are more dynamic meetings elsewhere, and more dynamic projects too, but it was salutary to sit in that meeting, in a northern town, in the traditional heartland of Quakerism, and feel the life-force ebbing away.

Notices about friends included details of two funerals. When I next visit this meeting house, the numbers will probably have dwindled further... depending on how many more funerals have taken place in the meantime. It's depressing to think that in five years time, this historic building might be a carpet warehouse, or a suite of offices.

**Q**uakers need to consolidate and plan for the future. It's time for Quakers to identify their objectives, their strengths and weakness, in order to have a realistic appraisal of what the future might hold. And do it soon, before 'natural selection' takes its toll. We don't need to

be a mass movement to continue to be a force in this world; my concern is that Quakers will disappear altogether.

I want Quakers to be defined less by what they believe in... and more by their willingness to listen and learn. Anyone can develop a set of beliefs (or choose something 'off the peg' from the 'ready to wear' religious range) and then find fault with those who hold different beliefs. All too often the religious impulse can be subsumed in the need to drive a wedge between one group of people and another: a legitimising of our need to belong to a group, combined with our fear of 'the other'.

This is, for me, the most important distinction between Quakers and other religious groupings. I don't want to choose between one belief system and other, one dogma or another, one set of religious observances or another; I don't want a set of beliefs that will immediately pit me against those with a different faith. I want to align myself with people who can look beyond these narrow beliefs into something limitless.

In a world where attitudes are hardening into fundamentalism, our openness seems ever more vital. So much religious belief is small, superficial, a bolstering of one's own self; in the face of forces we simply do not understand, we invent a God who is as petty and narrow-minded as we are.

My Quakers of the future sound very similar to the Quakers of the present. I can find few faults with the basic tenets of Quakerism. My main complaint is the obvious one: that too few people live by them and that most efforts to rectify this may be ineffectual and misdirected.

It's admirable - and entirely consistent with the serious nature of Quaker enquiry - that the brief was to write a substantial essay, rather than just finish a sentence ("I think Quakers are a good thing because...") in 25 words or less.

I've enjoyed writing this essay. It has helped to clarify my thoughts about an organisation which I've long admired, but only in recent years have felt a part of. It has sharpened my appreciation of the qualities that belong to Quakers. I feel more strongly than ever that the Quaker mindset is too valuable to allow it to dwindle away. Before I started writing, I was ambivalent about silent meetings; it seemed to be merely an interesting, and very English, version of group meditation. Now, 8,000 words - and a few weeks - later, I think I see the light. A shared silence may actually be the most important aspect of Quaker life, because it is from this pool of stillness that everything else springs.

With Samaritans it's such a relief to leave my 'baggage' at the door: while we're answering calls we don't judge people, or give advice or talk about ourselves. With Quakers, similarly, it's a relief just to be myself - with my ragbag of spiritual feelings, and my poor dress-sense - without feeling the need to explain or justify myself. It's good to leave some of my opinions outside the door and slip, instead, into that shared silence.

I haven't come to Quakers because I've tried everything else and found them wanting. I haven't really been looking for a structure in which to anchor my own spiritual feelings. It's not so much that Quakers prepared me for silence... more that silence prepared me for Quakers. You don't discover you're a Quaker... you discover you've been a Quaker all your life.