

"WHAT, TOM! A QUAKER?"

Summary

The basic assumption of this essay is that the future of the Religious Society of Friends depends on us finding out how to be both true to the experience of early Quakers whilst at the same time making best use of the institutional strength that organising as a charity may now bring.

This essay is in three parts. The first is about early Quakers, their experience of the presence of God in their lives, how they worked to share their life in the Kingdom, and how they crafted themselves as they did so. The second part sets out what I see as the problems facing the Religious Society of Friends today and the factors that make these so hard to resolve. The third part gives my view of how the Religious Society of Friends should be and, then, how we might get there.

Introduction

In 1659 Thomas Ellwood went to Oxford Assizes to give messages from his father to fellow justices. He bumped into some old friends. This is how he recalled this meeting in his autobiography.¹

When I had set up my horse I went directly to the hall where the sessions were held, where I had been but a very little while before a knot of my old acquaintances, espying me, came to me. One of these was a scholar in his gown, another a surgeon of that city (both my school-fellows and fellow-boarders at Thame school), and the third a country gentleman with whom I had long been very familiar.

When they were come up to me they all saluted me after the usual manner, pulling off their hats and bowing, and saying, "Your humble servant, sir," expecting no doubt the like from me. But when they saw me stand still, not moving my cap, nor bowing my knee in way of congee to them, they were amazed, and looked first one upon another, then upon me, and then one upon another again, for a while, without speaking a word.

At length the surgeon, a brisk young man, who stood nearest to me, clapping his hand in a familiar way upon my shoulder, and smiling on me, said, "What, Tom! a Quaker?" To which I readily and cheerfully answered, "Yes, a Quaker." And as the words passed out of my mouth I felt joy spring in my heart; for I rejoiced that I had not been drawn out by them into a compliance with them, and that I had strength and boldness given me to confess myself to be one of that despised people.

They stayed not long with me nor said any more, that I remember to me; but looking somewhat confusedly one upon another, after a while took their leave of me, going off in the same ceremonious manner as they came on.

In Thomas Ellwood's time being a Quaker mattered. It mattered to him and this was an important encounter for him. He had only recently started going to Quaker meetings. He had been in torment about his character and his own behaviour. He had agonised about this errand for his father because he feared that he might have to own up to being a Quaker to people he knew and to people his father knew. And now it had happened ... and he was relieved.

Being a Quaker mattered to Quakers themselves. It mattered to the people they stood out against. It mattered to governments, both Commonwealth and Restoration. These governments doubted their loyalty and conformity and worried about Quaker involvement in civil strife and uprising.

¹ This extract from Ellwood's account of his life is shortened in *Quaker Faith and Practice (QF&P)*, 19.16.

Do we matter now? Today Quakers are known for their commitment to peace and for their part in the abolition of the slave trade and in care for prisoners in past years. My previous meeting regularly hosted other local churches during the Week for Christian Unity. The minister of one of the other churches came every time. He told us, 'You keep the silence for us all.' We did not have our own meeting house. We met in an eleventh century church that had been replaced by a more modern church built a couple of hundred years ago. When queries were raised about our use of the building, the rector there challenged our claim to be a church and our right to belong to the local Churches Together. We felt uncomfortable and unwanted when we met him to talk about our tenancy of the old church.

The other Saturday, over a meal with some friends, I asked them what they knew about Quakers. This is what they said:

- 'Business ethics. But I can't think of any current examples.'
- 'I went to a Quaker funeral. It was very moving when people spoke ... saying real things, not just one person's eulogy.'
- 'Peaceful reflection. Thought before action.'
- 'Nice people ... a mixture of idealistic and practical. Sometimes they seem unworldly and then suddenly they're very practical.'
- 'Never really thought about them.'

Is this where we are now in the eyes of our contemporaries?

In comparison, 1659 seems a different world altogether. Then there were groups in England hoping and working for the overthrow of the state. The Fifth Monarchy men were those most feared. The Commonwealth government – and Charles II's the following year – linked Quakers to them. Tom Ellwood's friends, educated young men already of some standing in society, would have been very much members of those classes made most anxious by these perceived threats. A long way away from last Saturday lunchtime!

In some parts of the country, in the North and in East London and some other areas perhaps, we seem to make a real impact. Our central organisation does important work on matters of social policy, penal practice, and environmental and international problems. Apart from Friends², and a few others, to whom do Quakers matter? To whom does the Religious Society of Friends matter? Would we be missed if we vanished? And if we weren't here tomorrow, would that really matter?

² 'Friends', Quakers': I use these words interchangeably. Also, I am including 'Attenders' in both terms unless I make clear that I am only referring to people in membership.

Part One

The craft of being a Quaker

On the other hand, for early Friends, a world without Quakers would have been inconceivable. They were the field in which God sowed His 'Seed'. Christ had come to show them the way. They were working, not for themselves, but at the tasks God set for them. They had not chosen to do so. He had found and chosen them. He had brought them together and preserved them.

Writing about his spiritual growth between 1652 and 1654, George Whitehead recalls what becoming a member of the Quakers meant to him.

My entrance into, and beginning in the spirit, and believing in the light of our Lord Jesus Christ, was really in order to come into the new covenant and dispensation; Christ being given both for a light and a covenant, and to be God's salvation unto the ends of the earth. This new covenant is the covenant of grace, of mercy and peace with God, in his dear Son Jesus Christ. It is that reconciliation, that near agreement with God and Christ, which man must come into, if he is ever to enjoy true peace. All the Lord's people and true Christians know him in this covenant, from the least to the greatest; and are all taught of God, having also his laws written in their heart and put into their minds by his holy Spirit. His divine finger is in this covenant so that the Lord blots out their former forsaken transgressions and remembers their sins and iniquities no more, providing they continue in this everlasting covenant and in his goodness.

Belonging to this 'covenant community' brought with it a commitment to bringing the world into the order that God had given it. But there were important features in society and how it was ordered from which Quakers had to stand aside. These included: a paid clergy, the bearing of arms and the use of war and violence to settle disputes, and not using the name of God except in prayer and worship. So Quakers did not pay tithes, the tax on all to pay for the upkeep of clergy. They rejected violent rebellion and any form of resistance to forces of the state. They would not swear the oath of allegiance, whilst asserting their loyalty, nor swear on oath that their testimony in court was true. Speaking out in churches, sober dress, failure to follow the usual habits of greeting and courtesy, formal terms of address – all these drew attention to themselves. Quaker meetings were raided. Quakers were attacked by crowds, abused, scorned. They were arrested, fined, whipped, imprisoned, had property and wealth confiscated. Many died in prison. Some were rejected by their families.

So being a Quaker in those times called for steadfastness and hardiness, not just from those who travelled to build up the young movement, but also from members of local meetings. Many wrote up their lives. These accounts often include: an early life of indulgence and perhaps privilege, a period of soul sickness and questing (maybe even leaving home and family), seeking advice and guidance from priests and others who turned out to be false prophets, coming across or being led to Quakers, a period of profound turmoil and inner struggle, 'coming out' as a Quaker and the experience of persecution following that. At the same time, these matters are set out in terms specific to the writer and these lives are full of incidents that can only have happened to her or to him. So, whilst they may be written to a formula, they are very much about recognisably real individuals.

Early Quakers were united by knowing that they had been shown how to find the Kingdom of Heaven here and now, how to be 'perfect in this life'. For them, living in the Kingdom was simple and straightforward. This how Ellwood saw the future that beckoned him:

So that here began to be a way cast up before me for me to walk in-- a direct and plain way, so plain that a wayfaring man, how weak and simple soever (though a fool to the wisdom and in the judgment of the world) could not err while he continued to walk in it, the error coming in by his going out of it

And what he was going through on the way was both like the struggle that others also went through and, at the same time, very personal to him

And this way *with respect to me I saw* was that measure of divine light which was *manifested in me*, by which *the evil of my doings* which *I was to put away and to cease from* was *discovered to me*. (emphasis added)

Getting to that point was hard, beset with temptations and challenges, and often ridicule and worse. George Whitehead summed up his long turmoil with: 'I had a spiritual warfare to go through.' For Stephen Crisp, it was an 'iron furnace'. But the end of the turmoil was always certainty that God was present within and self had died on the cross. The epiphany of early Quakers was general, shared, bespoke, complete, and simple to live out. That's what

made them such formidable dissenters.

The life changing experience for these early Friends was meeting the Divine within themselves and coming to allow the Divine to be their constant guide from then on. But looking across some of their accounts, people who had already been through what they were then going through seem to have played a crucial part. Thus, George Fox mentions Elizabeth Hooton and 'one Brown'. James Parnell visited Fox in Lancaster Prison. Stephen Crisp had a crucial meeting with Parnell, and then – at a later crux – with the elders of Colchester meeting. Elizabeth Stirridge was strongly affected by ministry from John Audland and later spoke with William Dewsbury. Thomas Ellwood was thrown into turmoil by a few remarks of Edward Burrough after an evening spent with him and James Naylor at Isaac and Mary Pennington's home. Later, Frances Rance affirmed Ellwood's leading on how he should behave to his father and then John, her husband, supported him in doing so. Then, a year or so later, Ellwood had a further experience of affirmation. He visited George Fox the Younger in prison. Ellwood had written a pamphlet attacking the clergy. This had been, he says, dragged out of him by God. He was anxious about how it would be received by Quakers. Fox actually had a copy of it with him. He told Ellwood that it was just right.

These meetings tell us important things about the craft of early Quakers, how they set about sharing their revelation with others, and about their skill, care and understanding. Apart from Parnell's meeting with Fox in Lancaster prison, each writer describes one meeting with a Quaker when he or she still has work to do and suffering to endure. They are still torn between their old life and putting that aside. These first encounters then seem to be laying groundwork, leaving questions, and setting out, or getting across, that the way ahead is going to be hard, but God will be with as you go along.³ (Parnell's letter to Crisp after their meeting gives an idea of perhaps the kinds of things covered in these first conversations.¹) The second encounters appear

³ Extracts from some of the writings are in endnotes.

to have the function of confirming that the person has passed through ambiguity and uncertainty and is now firmly set on a clear course. For example, after his time with Elizabeth Hooton In early 1647, Fox was still 'a man of sorrows' 'in great temptations'. Then, some months later,

There was one Brown, who had great prophecies and sights upon his death-bed of me. And he spoke openly, of what I should be made instrumental by the Lord to bring forth.

After Brown was buried, Fox changed both in outward appearance and, inwardly, now with an overwhelming conviction of the rightness of the path before him. After his contact with Parnell, Crisp went through a further time of conflict and uncertainty. This was made more difficult because he felt that he was being led to go to Scotland to spread the Quaker message. If he did, he would have to leave wife and children. He sought the help of the meeting elders. His discussion with them helped to accept his calling. Elizabeth Stirridgeⁱⁱ also tells of two encounters. First, John Audland's ministry brought to the front of her mind the warring elements within her. Then, sometime later, she was able to speak directly to William Dewsbury after Meeting for Worship. Though still wrestling with her difficulties, Dewsbury 'had good tidings for me in that day', and left her uplifted.

Thomas Ellwood's first meetings with Quakers add other features to this discussion of first and subsequent meetings. Through his father, Ellwood met Isaac and Mary Pennington. Through them he met William Burrough and James Nayler. There are a number of incidents in Ellwood's account of these first and subsequent meetings that suggest that Quakers such as Burrough had a high level of skill in first and subsequent encounters. To take these incidents in the order in which they happened, first, the Ellwood family had stayed for a few days with the Penningtons, had gone to a Quaker meeting with them, and were having dinner the evening before they left. Burrough and Nayler were also there. The topic over dinner was "The universal free grace of God to all mankind". Ellwood's father got himself tied in knots and, in a modern phrase, Burrough and Naylor could have 'had him on toast.' But,

As my father was not able to maintain the argument on his side, so neither did they seem willing to drive it to an extremity on their side; but treating him in a soft and gentle manner, did after a while let fall the discourse, and then we withdrew to our respective chambers.

Next, the following morning, just as they were leaving, Burrough'

directed his speech in a few words to each of us severally, according to the sense he had of our several conditions.

Ellwood does not record what Burrough said to him. But, whatever he said, how he said it was profoundly unsettling.

And surely that which he said to me, or rather that spirit in which he spoke it, took such fast hold on me, that I felt sadness and trouble come over me, though I did not distinctly understand what I was troubled for. I knew not what I ailed, but I knew I ailed something more than ordinary, and my heart was very heavy.

Thomas Ellwood then went through a period of great turmoil in which he was forced to reflect on what we might see as his inconsequential enjoyment of the company of his friends and his attachment to fashionable clothing.⁴ He next saw Burrough at the local meeting a few weeks later. He very much wanted to talk deeply with Burrough, 'through whose ministry I had received the first awakening stroke'.

But I was somewhat disappointed of my expectation, for I hoped he would have given me both opportunity and encouragement to have opened myself to him, and to have poured forth my complaints, fears, doubts, and questionings into his bosom. But he, being sensible that I was truly reached, and that the witness of God was raised and the work of God rightly begun in me, chose to leave me to the guidance of the good Spirit in myself (the Counsellor that could resolve all doubts), that I might not have any dependence on man. Wherefore, although he was naturally of an open and free temper and carriage, and was afterwards always very familiar and affectionately kind to me, yet at this time he kept himself somewhat reserved, and showed only common kindness to me.

Then, sometime later, the Penningtons told Ellwood about the conversation they had with Burrough after he had seen the Ellwoods off.

And when we were gone off, and they gone in again, they asking him what he thought of us, he answered them, as they afterwards told me, to this effect: "As for

⁴ During this time he got considerable encouragement from one of the local Quaker meetings. (His account of his second visit there is in *QF&P* 19.15.)

Para 4 of *QF&P* 19.15 has the following omitted. This seems to me to leave out important aspects of what Ellwood was going through at that time.

My understanding began to open, and I felt some stirrings in my breast, tending to the work of a new creation in me. The general trouble and confusion of mind, which had for some days lain heavy upon me and pressed me down, without a distinct discovery of the particular cause for which it came, began now to wear off, and some glimmerings of light began to break forth in me, which let me see my inward state and condition towards God. The light, which before had shone in my darkness, and the darkness could not comprehend it, began now to shine out of darkness, and in some measure discovered to me what it was that had before clouded me and brought that sadness and trouble upon me.

the old man, he is settled on his lees, and the young woman is light and airy; but the young man is reached, and may do well if he does not lose it."

Taking these extracts together, what Ellwood is saying about Burrough, and Nayler, suggests considerable skill on their part at opening up for others the difficult path they will have to follow to become Quakers. There is their holding back in debate with Ellwood's father. Then what Ellwood calls 'the first awakening stroke'. This sounds like a reference to a recognised technique. At their next meeting, Burrough was perfectly civil, but 'being sensible that I was truly reached' did not encourage Ellwood to talk freely, so that God's work would continue in him and 'I might not have any dependence on man.' There is something way out of the ordinary here. Burrough and Ellwood have met twice. They have only spent one longish period together – meeting in the morning, then back to the Penningtons and dinner. But Burrough is able to see very clearly just where Ellwood is up to on his personal journey. This is very perceptive. And it is accompanied by precisely appropriate speech and behaviour. The possibility that we may be hearing about skill of a high order here is perhaps supported by the conversation between the Penningtons and Burrough after the Ellwoods had left. First, the highly educated and experienced Penningtons defer to the young Burrough. Then there is the accuracy of his comments on each of the Ellwoods, including his remark – after a short acquaintance - on Ellwood's potential.

At the same time, it is worth noting that what sounds like Ellwood's second encounter happened a little while later. He had come to see how he might behave towards his father in a way that would both respect Ellwood senior and, at the same time, be true to his Quaker convictions. But he was still unsure whether this was the right way ahead. He went to see John and Frances Rance at whose house the local meeting was usually held. He says of this visit

..... (T)hey received me with more than ordinary kindness, especially Frances Rance ..., who was both a grave and motherly woman, and had a hearty love to truth, and tenderness towards all that in sincerity sought after it. And this so kind reception, confirming me in the belief that my undertaking was approved of by the Lord, gave great satisfaction and ease to my mind; and I was thankful to the Lord therefor.

Putting this particular comment with the Importance of second encounters that all seem to be with another person, there may have been a shared understanding amongst seasoned Friends both about what was needed and that this was best gained through the ministry of someone different. The danger of one person both times could be of giving that person an importance that should only be, and indeed belonged to, God. In fact Ellwood seems to imply that this was his understanding when commenting in his second meeting with William Burrough.

There are a number of matters that stand out for me from these encounters. First of all, Elizabeth Hooton, James Parnell, John Audland, William Dewsbury, Edward Burrough and James Naylor were all amongst the Valiant Sixty. Next, it seems reasonable to take what Edward Burrough and Francis Howgill said about the Valiant Sixty to mean that there had been some sort of selection and quite thoughtful preparation before they set out. (See endnoteⁱⁱⁱ) At any rate, there appears to be system, understanding and practiced skill in the similarity between this set of first encounters and the different similarities between the set of second encounters. It is also worth noting that the words 'tender', 'tenderly', 'tenderness' occur quite often in these accounts to describe how troubled people are greeted and addressed. This usually goes along with people being alerted to the Light within themselves. At critical times, people are being helped to their feet.

The final point I want to make here about these early Quakers comes from Francis Howgill.

... 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?

It was this realisation that 'the Kingdom of God is here, and it is here now, that Howgill, the rest of the Valiant Sixty, Fox and the other early Quakers wanted to show, to share, and to awaken in all they met. It is what made them so angry with the priests of their time for stringing people along with their talk of sin, of how hard it was to get into Heaven, and for insisting on

payment for keeping God away from his people.

It seems to me that these early Quakers leave us with some serious and discomfoting questions to ask ourselves. They may have been, in Howgill's words, 'but men of small parts, and of little abilities in respect of many others.' But they had serious skills in pointing troubled people to the presence of God within them, in leaving and letting people get on with what they had to do and had to go through, and at allowing people to re-order their lives around what Christ offered each of them in particular. They lived in the Kingdom of God there and then. It was their present, their 'Now'.

- Is this something that we in the twentyfirst century have lost?
- If they were right then, can they be right now?

But the biggest question is: They knew that the Kingdom of God was where they were. They had been led, been shown, how to live their lives in the Kingdom. What if they were right?

Part Two

1. Present Problems

There are visible and measurable signs of decline in the Religious Society of Friends. As a presence in the country and as an organisation the Society is shrinking. Membership is declining. Meetings are getting smaller in size. Meetings are being laid down faster than moribund meetings are reviving or new ones are being set up. Income to local meetings is getting less, as are contributions to central work. At the same time, meeting houses are becoming an increasing burden to maintain their fabric and to meet their running costs. And an ageing membership is less able to contribute either physical effort or funds.

We have some measure of the decline of the Religious Society of Friends compared with 150 years ago. Joseph Stephenson Rowntree, in *Quakerism, Past and Present* reports that:

In 1856 the number of friends in England and Wales ("members") appears to have been 14,530.

The Britain Yearly Meeting Tabular Statement for 2006 gives a figure of 15152 people in membership. Though roughly the same number of members at both points in time, the proportions of the population were 1/1100 in 1856 and 1/3600 now.

It is also a weak organisation. Ambitions exceed resources. At the time of writing, both Quaker Life and, perhaps, Quaker Peace and Social Witness may have to cut some planned activity for the next financial year.

It is an organisation weakened by the imbalance between the centre and the other parts of the organisation, particularly local and area meetings. The emphasis seems to be on central work, corporate work, rather than on what individuals and local meetings are doing. To outsiders, what Friends are doing nationally is what they may know, not what the local meeting is doing. This imbalance is reflected in how some Friends talk about their own membership – a matter of local worship, some local activity and supporting national and

International activity.

This problem of balance is reinforced by poor and weak links between the centre and the periphery. A number of factors determine whether or not matters worked on by Quaker Life or Quaker Peace and Social Witness or Meeting for Sufferings, or even Britain Yearly Meeting, get taken up locally. Area and Local Meetings vary in the time they allow for reports and papers from these. And some representatives from these to central bodies are more energetic and thorough than others in getting material out and comments back. One example of how these links can vary is over the matter of same sex marriages. One area had closely followed the work in recent years by Quaker Life and leading up to the minute from Sufferings in November 2008. They were glad over Yearly Meeting's decision. A neighbouring meeting does not appear to have registered that there was a considerable debate going on. The lengthy, careful and important Minute of November 2008, with its request for local discussion, were just noted in the middle of a paragraph in the Area Meeting Minutes, not circulated. People in this Area Meeting were generally surprised that the matter had reached a decision. Some were shocked to resignation; some just because of this, others for whom this was the last straw in a longer disenchantment with the Religious Society of Friends.

There are some problems that seem to stick around, just don't go away or don't get resolved, may be not even addressed. For example, 8.23 and 8.24 in the 1995 edition of *Quaker Faith and Practice* appear again word for word (with one small change) as 8.22 and 8.24 in the fourth, 2009, edition. The first paragraph of 8.24 in the 1995 edition (8.23 in the 2009 edition) is written in strong terms. It deals with relations between central committees and local meetings. It says: 'It is imperative ... that there shall be a living and two-way communication between (central committees) and local meetings.' It continues:

It is sometimes complained that committees issue statements or initiate policies and work of which local meetings remain largely ignorant or see as some far-distant event, little affecting them. If the complaint is even in part justified, what remedy is

open to us? First, let us set our minds to see the committees not as some distant 'they' with documents emanating from an impersonal 'Friends House'. It is we who compose the committees and the document we dislike was, like as not, drafted by Friends in meetings not far from our own.

This is the strongest worded passage I can find in *Quaker Faith and Practice*. It has remained the same through at least three revisions of the book. It suggests that there may be systemic tendencies in the Religious Society of Friends that mean the Society gets stuck with problems or fails to deal with them effectively.

In fact, this is what Joseph Stephenson Rowntree argued in 1859. His view was that many of the problems then facing the Religious Society of Friends arose from the unintended consequences of a series of steps taken over the previous two hundred years to stop the loss of members and to protect them from harm. His main point is about the firmness with which the Society held to what had been measures or attitudes adopted by early Quakers because of the times they lived in. He made this 'essentially *deep* though *simple*' truth',
that the bringing of man *immediately* to Christ was the radical idea of Quakerism

the pivot of his essay. He argued that

(f)rom (this) central idea ... sprang at once the strength and weakness of Quakerism.

The 'positive' consequences were Quaker worship and rejection of 'a human priesthood, and of all ceremonial rites'. 'Negative' outcomes included the cutting off of Quakers from a broader understanding of Christ's mission and from the vast array of other aids to religious life, for example, the arts. At the core of his criticism of Quakers was his conviction that, in seeking to keep members safe, the Religious Society of Friends had adopted measures that were cruel and counter-productive in that they drove people away, rather than binding them close. For example, in early days, many people decided they would pay tithes and leave rather than refuse to pay and be ruined. Then in the eighteenth century, large numbers of people were disowned for paying tithes or for marrying out. Rowntree estimated that Quakers lost at least a third of their numbers just from this persecution of those who had married a non-Quaker. His view was that you protect people better from evil

by letting them know about it. To protect them from it, he points out with regard to Ackworth School, resulted in 40% of pupils who left the school between 1800 and 1840 very soon also left the Society. For Rowntree, the Religious Society of Friends of his day was doing itself great damage because it lacked generosity, openness to difficulty and weakness, and it failed to appreciate that Fox himself, whilst having very strong views, nonetheless was usually saved from pushing these too far by his great commonsense.

Part Two

2. On not dealing with problems

This section is about what gets in the way of tackling problems in the Religious Society of Friends. Some of these obstacles are probably peculiar to Quakers, but many of them characterise organisations in difficulty. I have sorted these into four sub-sections. These are about: matters that prevent problem-solving even starting; factors that foster the imbalance of power and influence in the society towards the centre; factors that weaken the other parts of the society; and a number of forces that work to undermine individual's wish or ability to say what they have it in them to say.

a. Blocks to problem-solving

Probably the most powerful impediment to Friends getting to grips with problems is the problem we have in getting to grips with each other.

This works itself out in many ways. These are some of them. Friends find it very difficult, if not impossible to agree about what the problems are, apart from the practical ones, and how to frame them. This difficulty seems related to some quite large and significant areas on which Friends agree to disagree. Thus, we have no shared view of the Quaker past, especially the earliest times. Are these 'Dead and gone'? Do they tell us what we're here for? Or are they just 'interesting'? Similarly, there are a range of positions on the nature of the Religious Society of Friends. Should 'religious' even be in the title? Is it a clearly defined and definable entity? Or is it a coalition? A loose alliance? A bricolage? Or what?

Perhaps the most fundamental difficulties arise from the very different worldviews of those in membership. These are often, though not always, related to people's attitude to the Divine. So there are Christian, Buddhist, theist, non-theist, universalist, and pagan Friends. Sadly, we tend to deal with these other perspectives by 'agreeing to differ' and not pressing the matter, rather than suggesting, 'How you see the world, and how you have come to that ... I'd like to learn about that.'

b. Strengthening the centre

The relationship between local groups and individuals and the leaders and centre of the organisation have been a problem for Friends since their earliest days. Early Quakers knew that their experience of God was direct, that their understanding of this was guided and shaped by the Light of Christ, and that they were living in the Kingdom of Heaven. This was a radical reframing of conventional ideas about religion and society. They were committed to showing others that this radical understanding could be theirs too. Early Quakers worked together to spread this good news. In just a few years, they had grown from local groups in the North West of England to a national movement.

One of the problems they faced early on was that of the relationship between what individuals believed they were called to do and what other Friends saw as behaviour that threatened both to break their movement and to make it even more vulnerable to attacks from the state. There were conflicts over these matters, with James Nayler in the mid/late 1650s, with John Perrott in the early 1660s, and with Wilkinson and Story in the 1670s. Leaders of the movement responded in two ways. They insisted that individual leadings needed to be tested by other Friends. They also set up the interlocking meetings and other arrangements that broadly continued until the 1960s. George Fox used the phrase "Gospel Order" to describe these arrangements (Moore: 2000, p 227). By the late 1670s, as Rosemary Moore says:

The charismatic Quaker movement had gone, and was being replaced by the Religious Society of Friends. (same, p 228)

So, what had been a movement was now an organisation. But lost with this, as John Stephenson Rowntree pointed out, was skill and practice in teaching and in seeking to spread the Quaker way. This had always depended on the abilities of individuals. Also, organisations live for the future. The experience of early Friends was that they were living in, bringing people to, the Kingdom now.

The latest changes in the organisation of the Religious Society of Friends have radically changed decision-making and responsibility. Until 2008, people in preparative meetings were only one stage away from someone, their monthly Meeting representative on Sufferings, who was taking part in all the major decisions in the Society. Now Yearly Meeting Trustees, under Yearly Meeting, have that responsibility. Quaker Life and Quaker Peace and Social Witness now report to them. Whatever the rationale behind these changes, they have resulted in members feeling even less in touch with how the society is run.

The changes that go with setting up Britain Yearly Meeting Trustees have also meant that the financial and property management activities of Friends, whether locally or centrally, are now dealt with by area or central trustees. It's too early to say yet what effect this change will have in the long term. But one of the strengths of using the 'Quaker business method' was that even in preparative meetings Quakers gained experience of looking after everything to do with their meeting. Local meetings no longer have this range of tasks.

c. Weakening area and local meetings

There are training courses for all the different kinds of officers in the Religious Society of Friends. However, what is missing is any kind of focus on the needs of Area Meetings and their redefined responsibilities. I often ask Friends in central parts of the organisation and from other parts of the country if they have a mental picture of their area meeting as an organisation, some kind of image that brings it together for them. I haven't yet got a clear response from anyone. This lack of thought about Area Meetings is an important gap. After all, we are members of our Area Meeting, not of our local meeting.

There are some Area Meetings that are strong and run with a sense of purpose. Some of these have been confident enough to change how they work, how often they meet, and what they do at their meetings.

However, many Area Meetings are struggling. The upkeep of Meeting Houses can be a major problem. They have great difficulty in filling posts. They may

have so much business to attend to that news from Friends House or from other central parts of the society just doesn't get more than just noted. There are wide variations in how well Area Meetings are wired into the communication and other linking systems (representatives, mailings etc). As yet, there has been no attempt to think through the challenges facing Area Meetings nowadays. But a lot of effort and money has gone into rejigging central structures.

d. Undermining individuals

A few years ago, Stevie Kraye wrote the Friends in Wales report *Opening the Door: the Spiritual Hospitality Handbook*. This described a whole range of manoeuvres and ploys that Quakers used to disempower newcomers and others who were not experienced in the ways of Friends. This seems to me to be another aspect of the problem Friends have with people claiming to respond to the Light within. If this claim is made in ministry in meeting for worship, that may be accepted. But outside it seems to present difficulties for unsympathetic Friends.

Over the last nine months there have been a number of *Comment* pieces and letters in *The Friend* about, or from, people with direct experience of mental distress who have been distressed or troubled by the reception they have got from Quakers. We have a big problem here to do with others as our equals, with others who are at the same time different in some way too.

One of the ways in which dissent, questioning even, gets challenged is in the demand that we must trust the people who have given of their time, energy etc for this or that service. The objections to this argument include North Somerset and Wiltshire and their errant Treasurer. Also, my understanding of discernment is that it can only take place when all voices can be heard. Not that everyone will want to speak, nor may this be practicable in the sense of all in one room. But there should not be obstacles or resistance.

To sum up this section, there are some big issues here that are very difficult for Friends to tackle when they concern themselves. We have such a

commitment to living in the Light that it is inconceivable that we might ever do dark deeds. One issue is to do with justice, or rather removing injustice. Miranda Fricker, in her book *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*, describes two kinds of injustice, 'testimonial' and 'hermeneutic injustice'. 'Testimonial injustice' is what a person says is discounted because the hearer is prejudiced against her or him, for example, you don't take me seriously because I'm foreign. 'Hermeneutic injustice' is more basic. This takes place when a person does not feel their own account is going to be believed because of race, impairment, etc. Both the examples in the last subsection were of one or other kind of injustice.

Another issue is about voice, about people not being expected to comment or question on what this or that group has decided, and is now reporting to, for example, Area Meeting. One claim made sometimes is that this sub-group has 'discerned' this matter. And that is expected to close off the matter.

The third issue is about information. In some meetings it is the custom for reports to be presented verbally at the meeting, with no prior warning let alone circulation, and for the meeting to be expected to make a decision there and then. It is one thing for there to be an urgent matter, for example, a flood yesterday at a meeting house. But for this to happen regularly and reliably speaks of general disrespect for the particular meeting.

Then there is power. Power is easier to see in a hierarchy. But it gets really subtle and oblique in organisations where all are supposed to be on the same footing. Sometimes, though, it can be quite nakedly displayed.

Part Three

1. What is the desired state?

In this section I set out the beginnings of my sketch for of the Religious Society of Friends if it is to sustain, develop and spread the Kingdom - the task for which it was called into being in the first place. There are two subsections here. These are, first, about people themselves. The second is about organisational design and about some of what will need to go into a framework that both runs an organisation and is the church for people bringing the good news of the Kingdom to the world. The next section is about how we might start to get there.

There is no argument in either of these sections - just statements, and questions and signposts.

1. People

The experience to which each of us has a personal invitation from God is to be one with Him in what Thomas Kelly calls the Eternal Now. It is there, seeing what He sees, that we take our place in looking after His creation. We need to know that this invitation is probably going to come through someone who is already at least a bit of a way further down this path than we are. (Though not always - I recently heard a Friend talk about the effect on her local meeting when someone new came along and got them all to work on what they could do for children. As she said: 'You never know what will happen when a stranger comes through the door.')

Whilst this invitation is there for each of us right now, nonetheless there are matters we need to attend to first. These are to do with seeing our own cumber for what it is and getting to know when the Tempter is seeking to trap us into doing the right deed, but for his reasons (and his reasons will fit very neatly with our own pride, self-deceit, or whatever). We will need further encouragement. And there is likely to be our own 'What Tom, a Quaker?' encounter, when we are brought face to face with how others now see us. This may not be the reflection we want or expect.

What we are being led into is a life in which there is only the present. I find the phrase 'physical presence' catches for me the two elements of the *present* and being in the *presence* of someone else, here and now. And this is a life in which words and silence and gesture and touch are what make a difference. We are also being led into a life that we cannot lead solely in the presence of the Divine. We must work alongside others.

b. People together

The Quaker church is, in Janet Scott's phrase, 'an immanent church'. That is, it is concerned with the world here and now and 'with God's presence in the world. It is not pointing towards the future, and reward then. So it has at least two tasks. One, as Quakers' 'covenant community', is to give Quakers the sustenance, partnership and encouragement that they need. The other is to provide what service it can to others.

The Quaker message is one that stands out against much of how the world is. This message is, in the Quaker way, presented by people who have been through inner 'spiritual warfare', by people who have gained a measure of hardiness and steadfastness. Also, if the account in the first part of this essay is correct, there is considerable method and skill needed, as well as hanging onto the fact that what happens is not my work, but God's.

The 'covenant community', therefore, needs a church that can think through how the craft of early Quakers can be made real today. Is travelling an essential part of it? What about different people for first and second encounters? First of all, it will need to work on how Friends can change from their non-proselytising stance to one of active engagement.

What we are talking about here is something that is both social movement and complex organisation. But movements and organisations are different kinds of social structure. Movements are usually collections of people who choose to come together to pursue an end they share but lack the resources to pursue on their own. Organisations tend to have formal structures and hierarchies, sets of rules, clear processes for joining and leaving, and

purposes that may have nothing to do with the desires of members or employees, but to which all must assent. Movements rely on inspired individuals and on individual inspiration. Organisations tend to demand that individuals put their own inspiration aside, or at least channel it, for the sake of the work and the work group. What draws people to a social or religious movement can make it very hard for them and an organisation to fit easily together.

It might be more difficult now for the Religious Society of Friends to provide a home for a movement. Reading side-by-side Chapter Eight in both the first edition (1995) and in the fourth edition of *Quaker Faith and Practice* (2009) gives a clear picture of just how much the Religious Society of Friends has changed as an organisation in the last fifteen years. It is now a much more tightly controlled, and centrally controlled, organisation than just a few years ago. This is important and valuable for central work. But these changes raise the question of whether and how the new structures, roles and relationships can be open to the concerns of Friends. These changes also bring into sharp focus the question of how to give tangible protection and due place to people seeking to follow the experience of early Friends.

Is it possible then to design an organisation that can both meet the needs of current Quaker central work and of people who are living in the Kingdom and who spend their time telling others about this?

Part Three

2. How do we get there?

The task is difficult but not impossible. There are resources we can use. We can find these both inside the Religious Society of Friends and outside. But we will still be left with some hard questions.

1. *Some Resources*

Our first resource is the lives and experience of early Friends. Rex Ambler writes about the lived experience and testimony of individual early Friends' in his paper in the Quaker Life study booklet *Quaker identity and the heart of our faith*. It seems to me that there is a lot more we could know about how they worked together and about the skills they used. We also need to reflect on whether or not we see our calling to be anything like theirs.

Often, it seems to me, that when we think of ourselves as Quakers we see that as something separate from ordinary life. There are Quakers who work with organisations and who draw on their experience as Quakers when doing so. They show us the much wider usefulness of some of our own practices. One example is Simon Western. His book *Leadership, A Critical Text* comes out of his PhD study of 'leadership and the Quaker movement'. His key lesson is that any group is likely to have leadership tasks and responsibilities that need to be carried out. But this does not mean that these have to be vested in the same person. There is something here that could be really useful for Friends with our problems over allowing leadership. Another is George Gawlinski. With his colleague Lois Graessle he has written a guide to *Meeting Together*. This is a very clear account, without using the phrase, of the Quaker Business Method being used in a wide range of situations and organisations.

There are ways of working and thinking that we can connect up with. Some occupations have to be very focussed on the present, nursing, for example,

and emergency paramedics. There are what are called 'high reliability organisations', such as, airlines, fire services, any organisation that has to have staff who can scan for danger or problems, can respond very fast, and can meld their thinking and actions with their colleagues. Both nurses and paramedics often don't have anywhere to take what their work does to them. I don't think we know how useful we and they might be to each other.

2. Hard questions

Two of the problems Rowntree described are still with us: spiritual education and ministry. Ursula Jane O'Shea, in her 1993 Backhouse lecture, also talks about the second of these. The third question here is to do with the size of Britain Yearly Meeting. The fourth is about the capacity of the Religious Society of Friends.

2.1 Spiritual education

For Rowntree Quakers did not put nearly enough effort into educating children or enquiring adults about religion, Quakerism, and the spiritual life apart from Quaker notions of the Inward Light. I don't think we have quite this problem now. However, we do not know nearly enough about how early Quakers lived out their faith. Nor do we know nearly enough about how we each see the world and how we've come to that.

- So the questions here are not about what we don't know, but why don't we know about the early Quakers and about each others world view? And just what does being a Quaker mean for me?

2.2 Ministry.

O'Shea asks if the decision to stop recording particular Friends as 'ministers' in 1924 was in the best interests of Friends.

Were sufficient outward forms retained, or created, to channel prophetic experience through the community, to renew it in the present and sustain it in the future?

Without ministers, Quakers in this country do not meet people who have

given themselves to living in the Kingdom here and now, if only for a year. We may have met people who have been Ecumenical Accompaniers in Palestine. But that is about what that was like, not about their experience of the same world I live in.

Other non-programmed yearly meetings have ministers and processes and procedures for recognising people as such. From what they have on their websites, Baltimore, New England and Canada Yearly Meetings, to mention just three, all have systems for recognising ministers. There are other aspects of their online information that is impressive. These include their general liveliness, their directness, their education programmes and, Canada at least, what they require of applicants for membership. What comes across at once is seriousness about commitment to Quaker Life. This is stuff that they know anyone may read. But it does not appear to have been shaped to give a good impression.

Therefore, why not reintroduce travelling ministers in the UK?

2.3 The size of Britain Yearly Meeting

Britain Yearly Meeting contains around 500 local meetings and over 70 Area Meetings. Baltimore Yearly Meeting has 40 Monthly Meetings. These are both Monthly and local meetings. They also have quarterly meetings. It seems to me that there are obvious questions about liveliness and so on in relation to size. And I was not able to find any information about membership numbers and age profile on their websites. But it seems reasonable to assume that smaller yearly meetings together with more forthright education programmes, requirements on applicants for membership, and travelling ministers as part of ordinary Quaker experience – that these together may be very important in fostering the spiritual life and witness of Quakers across the Atlantic.

So, why not break up Britain Yearly Meeting into regional yearly meetings and make local meetings Area Meetings?

2.4 The scope of the Religious Society of Friends

The problem for Quakers with ministers, certainly in the early days, was that

ministers were uncontrollable and could do things that brought the whole movement under threat. Also, today, I think it would be a major source of anxiety for Britain Yearly Meeting Trustees if they were responsible for Quaker ministers. However, I also think that travelling ministers could be of incredible value both to Quakers and to others.

So the questions here are:

What would be needed to set up a network structure for ministers independent of Britain Yearly Meeting Trustees, yet reporting to Britain Yearly Meeting? If this is not possible, what about an independent framework for ministers?

Finally

Somehow we need the hardiness, commitment and skill of early Quakers. Our structure now is probably incapable of providing us with that. Maybe we should be looking to other non-programmed yearly meetings to see what they can teach us now.

ENDNOTES

¹ Letter from James Parnell to Stephen Crisp

Friend,-In that stand, and to it keep your mind, which lets you see your enemies to be of own house; your imagination is an enemy; your wisdom is an enemy; that which has been precious to you is now your greatest enemy. Therefore now sacrifice your precious, and yield up to the death, [of self] that the Just may be raised to life and the righteous Seed be brought forth to reign and to be your head; and so will the head of the serpent be bruised. And this in your measure you will come to understand, as you dwell low in the Light, which shows you your condition; for whatever exposes your condition is the Light. And that eye must be kept open, which the god of this world has blinded, but by which the children of light see the god of the world; and the tempter is known, resisted and denied. So with this eye make your watch constant, and let not the fool's eye wander abroad, which draws out the wandering mind after visible objects; but stand in the warfare, not giving ground up to the enemy, nor to his delusions; but be content to become a fool, that all selfish thoughts may be judged. You will receive wisdom from Him, who gives liberally and does not criticize so that you can discern and know the enemy's tricks; but in the cross to your own will and hasty mind, the gift of God is received. Therefore, it is said, "He that believes is not in a hurry." Therefore, do not become weary of the yoke; for in faith it is made easy, and the impatient nature is crucified, and patience has its perfect work: therefore, be still in the measure of Light, which exercises your mind towards God; and purpose nothing, but let your thoughts be judged, and let the power of God work, so that He may be seen to all. By this principle alone you may be led and placed on the cross to the carnal part of yourself, by denying self, both in specifics and in general. And give no thought to pleasing man, when God is pleased; for by doing so, you prevent offending Him, for the love of the world is enmity with God. As that leads you to walk towards God in faithfulness, so it also leads you to walk with faithfulness towards man "with a conscience void of offence." And so to that keep your mind and *do not be hasty to know anything beyond what you have been shown*, for by such desire Eve lost her paradise. But lie down in the will of God, and wait on His teaching so that He may be your head. By such you will find the way to peace and dwell in unity with all the faithful; and though you are hated by the world, yet in God is peace and well-being.

ⁱⁱ Elizabeth Stirridge

1. John Audland

But blessed be the name of the Lord, he took me by the hand, and led me when I knew not of it, in the days of my tender years; and if I had not hearkned unto the enemy, my condition had been well. But as soon as he had drawn my mind into pride, and to take delight in fine clothes, it soon became my burden; for in a little time after, the Lord, in the richness of his love, was pleased to fit and furnish his faithful servants, and painful labourers, whose industriousness the Lord greatly prospered: two men of worthy memory, dear John Audland, and John Camm, in 1654. But when I heard the report of them, it struck a dread over my heart, hearing of their plainness. I began to think, how shall I demean myself to go to hear them? In a little time after, there was a meeting appointed by them, where my lot was to be, and dear John Audland was declaring; but as soon as I heard his voice, it pierced me; and when I came into the meeting, and heard his testimony, and beheld his solid countenance, Oh! how my heart was troubled within me, insomuch that I knew not what would become of me.

After meeting was over, I separated myself from my company, and travelled alone two miles, because no ear should hear me making my mourn unto the Lord; and out of the bitterness of my spirit did I say, "Lord, what shall I do to be saved? I would do any thing for assurance of everlasting life; and if the Lord will be please to accept of me upon any terms, I matter not what becomes of this outward body; if I could find out a cave of the earth that I might get into, where I might mourn out my days in sorrow, and see man no more," I thought I could have been contented; but it pleased the Lord to open the eyes of my understanding, and to lead me by a way that I knew not, and to begin the first day's work in my heart "which was the Spirit of the Lord to move upon the waters, and to divide the light from the darkness;" and when the separation was made, then could I see my way in the light, "which was the light unto David's feet, and was a lanthorn unto his paths;" and it will order every one's goings aright, if they take heed unto it.

2. William Dewsbury

Oh! how soon was I caught by his subtilty; for he infused in me, and persuaded me, it was in vain to strive any longer, for I should never inherit the kingdom of heaven. But a liar he was, and ever will be; my soul is at enmity with him, the Lord in whom I trust, preserve me, and my house for ever: as it pleased my heavenly Father, who had a regard unto me, to make way for me to escape: for in a little time after it was my lot to be at a meeting where a faithful servant of the Lord was, by name William Dewsbury, whose testimony was mostly unto the distressed and afflicted, tossed with tempest, and not comforted: which state many were in, in that day.

A true messenger he was unto many. I was 21 years of age when I was in this condition; but after meeting was ended, I dreaded to go unto him, for I thought that he was one of a great discerning, and he would be sensible of the hardness of my heart; and if he should judge me, I should not be able to bear it; but yet I could not go away in peace, until I had been with him; who seeing me coming so heavily on, held up his hand, with a raised voice said unto me, 'Dear lamb, judge all thoughts and believe, for blessed are they that believe and see not.' And with a raised voice again said, 'They were blessed that saw and believed, but more blessed are they that believed and saw not.'

Oh! he was one that had good tidings for me in that day, and great power was with his testimony at that very time; for the hardness was taken away, and my heart was opened by that ancient power that opened the heart of Lydia; everlasting praises be given unto him that sits upon the throne for ever, who hath preserved me out of the snares and subtil contrivances of the adversary.

iii The Valiant Sixty

1. William Burrough

Then [the Lord] having thus armed us with power, strength, and wisdom, and dominion, according to his mind, and we having learned of him, and been taught of him in all things, and he having chosen us into his work, and put his sword into our hand, and given us perfect commission to go forth in his name and authority, having the word from his mouth what to cut down and what to preserve, and having the everlasting gospel to preach to the inhabitants of the earth, and being commanded in spirit to leave all, and follow him, and go forth in his work, yea an absolute necessity was laid upon us, and woe unto us if we preached not the gospel.

2. Francis Howgill

The Kingdom of Heaven did gather us, and catch us all, as in a net, and His heavenly power at one time drew many hundreds to land... 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? And will He take up His tabernacle among the sons of men, as He did of old? And what? shall we, that were reckoned as the outcasts of Israel have this honor of glory communicated amongst us, which were but men of small parts, and of little abilities in respect of many others...

