

## The Future of Quakers in Britain

### **Introduction**

I'm passionate about the Quaker way. I think about what it is for and what it means, I try and live it. I pray about it. I dream up possibilities and impossible options too for how to re-organise ourselves, how to support us all, how to change the world and how to live like it is heaven on earth.

For the most part most Friends in Britain don't get many opportunities to do a sustained piece of thinking or writing on a topic such as the future of the Religious Society of Friends in Britain, or even the Quaker way. Many of us are too busy trying to develop or embody this vision of the realised eschaton without having time to stop and articulate it or plan differently for it; many of us are busy with caring, with family and work responsibilities, with doing the shopping and cleaning, with earning the daily bread and with sitting on a local meeting committee.

This too is a part of our present and possibly our future as Quakers in Britain. But the invitation to think more deeply about this and to put something together with a sense of prophetic vision, purpose and possibility is one that is too good to miss.

When I talk with Friends about our life as Quakers in Britain I find that we use social, sociological and theological language. Sometimes this requires translation, it always requires some time. Inevitably there are all three sorts of language here in this essay – because if we are to talk of god and of making god present and practised then inevitably there is some theology. If it is also about who, how, why and when, there is also, inevitably some sociology in what I have to say – but I also want this to be accessible so I've tried not to dress this up too fancily.

I've also stuck to a tried and tested format for this essay. There are many reasons for doing it this way, but primarily it's to help ground the reader in an understanding of how I reached the conclusions I have drawn. I start with a methodology and methods section to help you understand why and how I have put this together, done my research and so forth, as well as what has influenced me to do it in this way.

This is followed by a section on Quaker discourses. In conventional extended essays this would normally be a literature review – but I've gone beyond the printed word to try and make sense of where we currently are and I am using a range of 'discourses' or narratives as source material

After this discourse analysis I'm following on with some narrative about what all of my research can tell us. The framework of this section follows a structure intended to help us make sense of the findings and where they might lead us. This findings section has five subsections; the first is a section called 'awareness', it is concerned with making us all aware of what is currently going on and maps the territory for us.

This is followed by an 'exploration' which draws together a 'what's working and what's not working' analysis. Next is an 'in-spirit-ation' section. This is the part where I talk about how we could be, it has some elements of vision and hope and for some it may be the bit that is either most appealing or most difficult to hear. It does suggest some radical change and it does question any sense of cosy security we might currently enjoy.

The penultimate section is called 'ownership' – because to make change from within we have to be up for that, own the vision, take risks and be radical. The last findings section is a sub-section on how we can get there, called 'undertaking and understanding'! At the very end there is a short concluding section.

This means that in this essay I'm not only offering a diagnostic of the state of the Religious Society of Friends in Britain now or simply a vision of how it might be. What lies at the heart of this essay is a sense of what we might need to do to transition from one state to another and what we need in order to achieve that together.

There are other reasons for using this sort of essay format and for these 5 subsections framing the findings and I'll come back to this later on. I hope this way of working is a help to you the reader in getting to the heart of what I have to say here about the future of Quakers in Britain.

## **Methodology**

In thinking about this essay I couldn't help but be informed by research I've done elsewhere on other cultures and organisations. This experience informs my methodological impetus as well as my own concerns and analysis about what is happening amongst Friends today. At a basic level methodology is all about the ideology that underpins a piece of research. The political scientist Louis Althusser once defined ideology as 'how we live in the world'. So perhaps it helps for you to know where I stand and how I live in the world.

I'm a Quaker by conviction, I'm a member (though I use the words 'Quaker' and 'Friend' inclusively and don't make a distinction between attenders and members), I've given service in several roles across my AM and YM, I'm female, I have a social science background, and I came to Friends in my 30s. So what? What this means is that I can't help but have a particular perspective and that is borne of having arrived at Friends at a particular stage in my own religious formation. My life stage has also influenced the degree to which I have been able to be involved with Friends both locally and nationally, and my gender probably influences how I 'read' what is going on around me.

I could fill you in on other things but alerting you to what I see as these key parts of my biography is probably enough for you find resonances or dissonances with your own experience which will help when trying to make sense of my experiences and my analysis.

Alongside this, my past work has involved using models and tools, processes and practices from a range of different work environments and sectors. There are some good ideas and methods in secular society that we can use to help us make sense both of our current situation, of where we want to be, and of ways to get there.

So, to help me in researching and writing this paper I'm making use of four different tools, and these are very much a part of my wider methodological /ideological approach – I am sure that to transform the social we have to pay attention to the spiritual but that the converse is true as well, to transform the spiritual we have to pay attention to the social. These tools are from both the social and spiritual arenas as I have come to the conclusion within the Religious Society of Friends that we need to pay attention to both.

The first is a tool called 'discourse analysis' and is as its name suggests an analytical tool and a way of making sense of the different stories we tell about ourselves, the second is a tool which has helped me to make sense of the overall direction of Friends, this is known as 'action learning', the third is a modelling tool based around the permaculture sustainable systems model, the fourth is the simple structural tool I'm using to frame this paper (a convention found across the academic and policy oriented world).

These four tools although not from within the Quaker world can help us make sense of it. To get to grips with where we are or where we want to be, of necessity we have to take a good look around us. We need to become aware of, and understand what is really going on, and find language and other means to describe and explore this too. We also need to reflect on its meaning for us at a deep level and then, out of this place of spiritual rootedness understand and then undertake what might come next.

This has something of the cycle that many of go through when we try to discern the way forward. Whether we understand discernment as seeking the will of God, a decision grounded in the collective consciousness of the gathered meeting, or our own personal rationale for how we come to a particular decision – discernment as a word is increasingly used amongst Friends as a shorthand for a process of exploration that leads somewhere, even (and especially) if the destination is one unknown at the outset.

If I describe my methodology (and my use of these tools as the basis for this essay) in terms of a commitment to this sort of discernment cycle 'awareness', 'exploration', 'in-spirit-ation', 'ownership' and 'undertaking/ understanding' (for shorthand AEIOU) that could be a helpful translation of the process I have gone through over the last few months in putting this together. This then is the fifth and spiritual dimension of this piece and frames the findings section of the essay. The work underpinning it has, in the end, been a kind of discernment process for me, and this is a particularly Quaker methodology.

## **Methods**

In putting this paper together I've taken a qualitative approach to the 'data' available to me. I have looked at a lot of websites, books, DVDs, facebook,

myspaces, blogs and youtubes, I've listened to people, I've been to events and courses and engaged in participant and non-participant observation, I've conducted some simple semi-structured interviews. I've also thought about it, and because I believe in the collective and corporate process that takes place with others in the stillness I have taken it to meeting for worship, and tested my findings with others.

(One of the gaps in my methods/approach is that I haven't read up on the current academic work concerning the life of Meetings in Britain today. There are some research findings that it's hard not to be aware of but I don't reference any in this essay beyond the most general. In part this gap is due to pressures of time, but in part it has been to avoid being overly influenced in coming to my own conclusions and identifying my own findings).

I am, as it happens of the frame of mind that likes to step back, make sense of, analyse, identify and frame solutions. This predisposes me to write and work in a particular way, and has been useful in both. What it has led to in this instance is an initial stage of being willing to listen and be open to what is there followed by a stage of analysis and interpretation. Of course none of the above means I've got *the* answer, but it does mean that some ideas have occurred to me (and I'll be fascinated to see where I and other essay writers concur or disagree).

Here I'll briefly introduce you to the four tools I've used in composing this paper – this will help you have a better sense later on of what has informed the section loosely gathered together under the heading 'findings'.

### **Tool 1. Discourse Analysis**

This is a tool generated within post-modern academia which views events, actions, relationships and behaviours as well as written or spoken narratives as 'discourses'. These different kinds of narrative or discourse are amenable to analysis using pre-described frameworks of interpretation (in this case the AEIOU framework I outlined earlier). In this instance every 'discourse' I read or analysed helped me make sense of where we currently are, where we might go and what might help bridge the gap between these two states.

### **Tool 2. Action Learning**

When many organisations take stock of themselves a tool that is frequently used is one that is called an 'action learning cycle'. There are four parts to it

- Observe
- Reflect
- Plan
- Act

These are seemingly relatively straightforward steps – you take a look at what's going on, you try and analyse what of this is working well and what is not, you plan for possible changes and then you act on these ideas.

Though it's not without its problems (how you do each stage isn't predetermined) for the most part I've made use of this cycle to help identify and explore different aspects of life amongst Friends in Britain and to make sure I don't succumb to the temptation to jump straight in with solutions without really outlining the issues.

This model also neatly maps onto parts of the Discernment cycle I outlined earlier – awareness, exploration, ownership and undertaking/understanding – though what this discernment cycle adds in is an in-spirit-ation section; an awareness that we are not solely an organisation in the secular sense but that we remain the *Religious* Society of Friends and that this matters.

What both action learning (AL) or the discernment cycle also omit is an explicit naming of the vision that underpins the application of the cycle. AL is almost always used in the context of an organisation that has a sense of itself, or its vision and mission, but which as an organisation has lost some of the means rather than the ends.

In the context of Friends in Britain I'll just be checking in on the extent to which we are still universally clear about our vision and purpose and what that is.

As someone who has worked in the third sector I know that a cycle like this is never enough to make sense of a dynamic organism; so I've also used a model based on understanding eco systems to help envision the future sustainable and sustaining life of Quakers in Britain.

### **Tool 3 Systems modelling**

One of the things that has been useful to many social scientists and ethnologists is the idea of a social system being not dissimilar to a complex eco-system – where, for example, if particular interventions are made extinction of species is an inevitable result. There has been talk (and research) done that demonstrates the imminent threat of extinction to liberal Quakers or at least liberal Quakerism.

This got me started on thinking of Quakers in Britain as a complex ecosystem, a structure or system that can be subject to analysis in a spirited way and where interventions can be made to restore and/or sustain a healthy and sustainable balance. I realise there are problems with biological or ecological paradigms or parallels, nevertheless these kind of systems models do give us some tools for analysis and more particularly in helping us draw up new designs.

The particular model I've drawn on relates to work done by permaculture activists over the last 30 years and includes tools which help in modelling and designing sustainable social systems.

These three tools are the means by which I collected the data, interpreted it and then produced a design of what might be and a road map to get there.

Although I don't directly refer to the models again they underpinned how I arrived at the 'findings'.

#### **Tool 4**

The fourth tool is the one being used to frame this paper. Research is easy! Well, mostly easy. (Robust, systematic, reliable research less so but there's lots of guidance out there on how to conduct research. I've also taught research methods for a long time and conducted and supervised a lot of qualitative social research studies; this leads to a degree of confidence about where my gaps as well as strengths are in the research that underpins this essay.)

Writing a sustained piece, however, is difficult. Reading a sustained piece can be even harder! To help the reader both Quaker and non-Quaker I've used a fairly standard essay format. It is easier to structure a piece around clear headings. Clear signposts in the text, an understanding of what the author has used to inform their ideas, a sense of development in the findings, and the generation of proposals for change based in experience are generally more persuasive to a reader than a simple statement of aspiration and vision. And in this instance I am sure that this is especially true for Quakers.

I say this because on reflection I have concluded that we are not fantastically good at recognising the prophetic voice amongst us unless they can also explain the wherefores and why-fores of that vision. We like our prophets to have their feet firmly on the ground rather than have their heads above the clouds. When I consider the prophetic voices I've encountered amongst Friends over the last few years I can see that the old adage of a prophet being despised in their own country still rings true for us today. I'll come back to this later in this essay.

But I start with where I looked to get a sense of what story we are telling about ourselves to ourselves (and sometimes to those outside our rather loose knit community).

#### **Discourses (amongst Friends)**

There are a number of co-sequential discourses about Friends going on at present. Some of these are located within established Quaker bodies and institutions, some are part of the centrally managed work, some are generated by individual friends with a particular interest or Concern, and some are part of learning programmes and planning by different sorts of groups.

They may be part of the formal discourses and communications of the Society, and they may be the informal narratives and communication that go on day in and day out between friends on and off the bench. Here are a few examples

- Gatherings
- Summer schools
- The Friend (especially the letters page)
- Friends Quarterly

- Quaker news
- Local newsletters
- Quaker B
- The national Quaker website
- CYP programme
- Listed informal groups
- Local and Area Meeting websites
- Quaker Studies journal
- The programme of courses at Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre
- YM epistle, JYM epistle
- YM minutes and YMG minutes
- Events and courses at Woodbrooke, Charney Manor, Swarthmoor Hall and elsewhere
- Social events e.g. AM tea
- Study groups
- Meetings for Worship for Business
- Coffee conversations (what happens between sessions, after Meeting, when you bump into a Friend in the supermarket etc)

These discourses tell us all kinds of things about ourselves, they tell us where our strengths are and they tell us about our weaknesses. We'll come to these shortly.

The discourses also tell us that we are not all entirely happy about who we currently are and how we currently are. Inevitably there are some Friends who are glad simply of the opportunity to sit in silence for an hour in the middle of very busy, noisy and irksome lives and feel that this is enough for them.

Although this will sound harsh this is not what the Quaker way is about - and these discourses tell us that there are many Friends who yearn for something more, delight when it happens and feel intensely frustrated at what are seen as the obstacles to fulfilling this vision.

An analysis of these discourses also tells us that in some ways we are absolutely committed to spiritual transformation and the social change this can engender in our own lives as well as in society. The instances in our history of which we seem most proud of corporately are those where a prophetic voice has been heard, understood, and a new course of action undertaken.

Today however it seems increasingly hard to be sure what prophecy consists of and what we can do with prophets and the message they have for us. We seem to have lost the skill of nurturing the prophet and recognising the prophetic voice.

Prophets can be bracing, gritty, and challenging, what they say and do can make us uncomfortable. They may be full of shoulds and oughts, guilt and sorrows. They might be loved or respected, but they might not be liked. This



can mean their message is lost or overlooked or that when they once again get to their feet in meeting they are greeted by a collective sigh.

If you took a moment to reflect on the story your meeting tells about itself (with or without words) what would you find? What do newcomers encounter? Is there a Friend regarded as faithful but difficult? What do seasoned Friends say over coffee after Area Meeting? Where are the gaps between the aspiration and the reality? What's really going on?

## **Findings**

### **1. Awareness - What's going on?**

When I started doing the background work for this essay I had a good hard look at the varying discourses as outlined above. Inevitably this analysis is going to be partial because the narratives or stories I've heard are not the complete picture. Nevertheless here we go - this is going to be what's known in some media circles as a bad news sandwich.

The bad news first; what I found was that how we describe ourselves to ourselves is that we are: complex, paradoxical, frequently internally inconsistent, bureaucratic, theologically illiterate and suspicious, individualised, divided, cosy, spending too much time on structures (buildings etc) and infrastructures (meetings etc), overburdened, stricken by conflict, spiritually dry, wishy washy, exclusive, uncertain, top heavy, and unlikely and undeserving of survival! <sup>1</sup>

If that horrifies you as it does me, then the good news is that we also say the following about ourselves, we are: good communicators, hard working, inspiring, willing to be open and change, sometimes very disciplined in our upholding of discernment processes, inclusive, passionate, and living true to our values, hopeful, engaged, and inspired.

The second bit of bad news is that we don't say these positive sorts of things about ourselves nearly so often as we say the other things and we're more likely to say these positive things in the formal discourses than in the informal ones.

### **2. Exploration - What's going well and what's not so good?**

If we look harder at the stories we tell about ourselves there are a number of key factors that occur again and again as being part of the good news or the bad news. When things go well we describe ourselves as inspired and inspiring (to borrow the phrase from this year's YM epistle) and when things go badly what we often attribute this to is that we are cumbersome, overly bureaucratic and (maybe consequently) overburdened.

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<sup>1</sup> This isn't always how others see us and research currently being undertaken for Quaker Quest may show us something dramatic. As with much formal social research it may – though this is not inevitable - tell us what we think we already knew through what is known as 'common-sense' knowledge. The point of conducting proper systematic research is that whilst it may confirm what we already know we now can have confidence that that 'knowledge' carries legitimacy and weight and is more than just 'common'-sense.



That what is described as positive is sourced spiritually and what is regarded as negative is grounded socially is I think significant. We want to be a spiritual (even religious) community rather than simply a society of friends.

It worries me that many Friends describe being encumbered, overburdened and faced with bureaucratic intransigence as their primary experiences of Quakerism. If it's not the first things they describe what I have seen is that when their frustrations are explored or opened up they are still rooted in this perception and/or experience of bureaucracy, cumber, or overburden.

For some it is intensely frustrating, especially when they feel they have a solution to the bureaucracy, are willing to divest, or say no to yet another role in the meeting. It is salutary that some Friends leave because they can't bear the burden of responsibility (sometimes with little corresponding authority) any longer. This frustration or sense of despair is intensified if Quaker ways and practices are used as excuses not to change.

Our willingness to change may come down to where we locate the authority to make change. Historically before making any changes Quakers in Britain looked to the bible (especially the Gospels and Epistles of the New Testament) and to testing any new understandings or undertakings in the gathered meeting. These two sources of authority were widely understood and accepted as the *primary* and ascendant sources of authority.

Now today things are different. These two remain part of our story, but increasingly we also cite other sources of authority which we perceive as carrying equal weight. These include personal experience, the opinion of weighty or seasoned Friends, the tradition of the community (sometimes as it is expressed in Quaker Faith and Practice) and secular expertise, rules and regulations. When we find change difficult it is often because some of us are calling on a particular authority that underpins it, authority which others don't recognise.

Many Friends however, offset the difficulties they experience against the good things that happen locally, regionally, or across the Yearly Meeting. When we hear or are part of something inspiring we are ourselves inspired.

It has always been the case that part of our inspirational nature as Quakers is that we like narratives, stories, and discourse. For a community that conducts its worship in silence (and expectant waiting) we use a lot of words outside. Overall this is a good thing as communication, cultural transmission, and an expressive community are key features in ensuring a sustainable future.

We are also inspiring in that we don't stop at the words but also parallel this with action of various kinds. Historically we have worked for change and been inspiring in a number of ways: Whilst some of us have been called to speak out; others have built or demonstrated the alternative to the mainstream; celebrated the good stuff, prayed and praised; taken symbolic or practical action; or held to a vision of the kingdom come.

This activity has been enormously influential and means that Quakers as a group have been viewed as a prophetic community within British society. This has both an upside and a downside. On the positive side we sometimes are regarded as a form of social conscience which can encourage and enable us to live up to the light expected of us.

The instances in our history of which we are collectively most proud are those where a prophetic voice has been heard, and understood, and a new course of action undertaken.

As mentioned above we seem to have lost the skill of nurturing the prophet and recognising the prophetic voice. It may be due to uncertainty and a loss of vision. But this may also be for a slightly different reason. The role we have played in wider society may be part of why we find prophecy difficult today. Alongside the stories of transformation and change we have also been handed down stories of economic and political marginalisation, social exclusion, and religious persecution.

So on the one hand we want to be inspired and inspiring; on the other hand we are aware that there may be costs in doing this.

One of the further obstacles both to prophecy and inspiration is that although oppression and marginalisation may draw people together, (adversity can be a great social cohesive), it requires there to be some common narrative and vision around which to gather. And at the moment the burdens, the cumber and the bureaucracy may well obscure or take the place of the vision.

For some Friends we have become an organisation or set of institutions set on replicating ourselves organisationally and institutionally rather than on addressing and answering the spiritual and social needs of the day. Our discourses at this time suggest that the negative stuff (bureaucracy, cumber and overburden) increasingly gets in the way and this makes us anxious.

Part of this anxiety is that we're conscious that the make up of the Religious Society of Friends and that what we are replicating isn't anywhere near good enough or suited to answering the social and spiritual needs of today.

Historically, the Religious Society of Friends was largely a closed group but was also much more representative of wider society. Our community reproduction and transmission happened in house (so to speak). Quakerism was caught and not taught and there was very little emphasis on evangelism in the sense of outreach in Britain (we did go off and do it elsewhere).

Today it is different. One of our significant weaknesses lies in our current demographic make up – we're *largely*, though not exclusively, white, middle class, middle income, educated at University/College level, we have slightly larger numbers of older and younger participants than other equivalent groups – but with an age gap in the middle, we're mostly able bodied, inclusive of diverse sexualities up to a point, well travelled, politically conscious, ethically

motivated, community oriented, and with diverse theological perspectives and spiritual experience.

This grouping is what is called the 'dominant discourse' and it can mean that those who do not fit it may feel some sort of conflict with the 'story' at some level. Our cultural capital is tied into this discourse and we also go to an extraordinary length to preserve it. We admit those who are willing to fit themselves to it through a process we call membership.

Our story is that the route to membership is a spiritual process but we should also be aware that it increasingly serves social and cultural agendas too. Those who resist membership may not be doing so because they feel uncommitted, spiritually adrift or indifferent to the community -they may be resisting the narrative.

We also know that once there anyone who doesn't fit may be a source of conflict – that's almost inevitable when the dominant group feels threatened. We know we are not always very good with our own conflicts and we don't always know how to unlearn racism, homophobia, sexism, ageism and other exclusionary practices.

And yet there is a definite concern that those who do not 'fit' this picture will not be attracted to Friends in the first place. The hope of appealing to a wider community of people isn't rooted in a sense (only) that we need more people to do the jobs. The discourses also tell us that we are not all entirely happy about this state of affairs, are aware that this is unrepresentative of society as a whole in Britain, and that because our current process of replication mainly attracts those who are only already like us we need to change it.

Why there is concern about a truly diverse community is partly to do with a partially held belief that diversity is enriching, partly to do with a more widely held belief that the Quaker way should be big enough to hold a much greater diversity than it currently does, and partly because there is an almost universal narrative amongst Friends that at our best we are blessed with the fruits of the spirit and why wouldn't we want to welcome all those inspired by that possibility and vision.

Overall this means that although we are aware of our own (mainly social and cultural) weaknesses we still believe that we have strong spiritual strengths and it is this which keeps us going.

### **3. In-spirit-ation: a Vision of how things might be?**

How do we want to be? Inspiring? Uplifting? Able to affect social change? Able to support spiritual transformation? Willing to take risks? Dedicated?

What Friends yearn for is a re-invigoration of the spiritual side of our lives as Quakers together and that any structures/infrastructures should simply be there to support this. What I have heard most often is that we want to be the following:

- A true community – encouraging full inclusion, participation and commitment - less concerned about us and them – a convergent ‘church’
- Visionary and prophetic
- Loose footed, fluid and flexible
- Emergent and engaged
- Inspiring and inspired
- Willing to discern together
- Theologically literate
- Spiritually literate
- Divesting and disencumbering
- Communicating, learning, and listening
- More loving and less fearful
- A willingness to be revolutionary as well as evolutionary in terms of spiritual and social transformation with a greater willingness to be open to change

And that we want to have:

- An embodied theology
- Exploratory and experimental approaches to worship
- Fewer structures and infrastructures
- A prophetic voice and a willingness to look for more opportunities for real engagement in the world
- More emphasis on understanding what we do, why we do it, and how we can do it better

This extraordinary and hopeful vision grounded in inspiration is already embedded amongst Friends. So why isn't it a realised one? Almost always there are particular social and cultural obstacles and it's these I address below.

The format I've used is deliberately based on that used in 'advices and queries'. The A and Q format suggests that as a community we encourage ourselves to reflect on an issue both individually and collectively and ask ourselves challenging questions too.

The format is useful here because it implies advice and it would be disingenuous to imagine that I'm not endeavouring to give some! Consequently a short paragraph about the issue is followed by some questions which we need to address in order to realise our vision.

**A true community – encouraging full inclusion, participation and commitment, less concerned about us and them ~ a convergent ‘church’**  
 The obstacle here seems to be around our demographic and our membership process. If we considered everyone who came regularly to meeting as a full part of the community without a need for membership to define those who were inside or outside we might find that more people came more often.

We are also scared of the conflict that greater diversity might bring, afraid to give up our own power and unwilling to dilute our current state

Can we be genuinely more welcoming, inclusive and participatory?

### **Visionary and prophetic**

We seem as a community to struggle with notions of leadership, authority, power and prophecy. New ideas about servant leadership, a continuing willingness to distribute and redistribute roles, an ability to work towards a common understanding of spiritual authority, all have their part to play.

Are we willing to accept appropriate leadership, explicitly negotiate about authority, and nurture prophecy?

### **Loose footed, fluid and flexible**

Our processes, our structures, and our infrastructures often seem immutable because they have emerged gradually sometimes over centuries of experience, accumulation and practice. But we live in an age which causes structural instability – it's like living in a social, economic and political earthquake zone.

Are we willing to look at where these instabilities lie and how we might design our own processes and structures to withstand seismic change? Can we make ourselves future proof and in so doing help to make that future?

### **Emergent and engaged**

For many years Friends have been at the forefront of social and spiritual change. This is no longer the case. Globally, churches, faith groups and other agents of social/spiritual change are experimenting and developing in all kinds of ways. Many of us have come from other church and faith groups and found a home amongst Quakers and we may be unwilling or unable to see the extraordinary riches that other communities may have to teach us about.

Can we be open to the riches and work being done elsewhere? Are we willing to share and develop what we have learnt so far in our own community's journey of faith and exploration?

### **Inspiring and inspired**

Meeting for worship remains for many as an important source of inspiration. But other things can inspire us as well. We have lost several important dimensions of earlier Friends' spiritual lives. The ministry of the spoken word, travelling in the ministry, and an understanding of ourselves as a dispersed community rather than a Congregationalist church have either been lost or are very sporadic amongst Friends in Britain. And yet – when they happen we talk about the deep joy and hope that these engender.

How can we support the ministry of the spoken word? Are we willing to liberate those acting under concern? Are we able to do the work necessary to link us together more creatively and effectively?

### **Discerning**

Part of Friends' theology is to believe in the notion of continuing revelation. This means that our state of understanding and practice is not once and for all time but open to change. We have an incredible array of processes and tools honed over many years of practice and experience to help us discern and test new ways of being and doing.

We have often been described as an experimental faith, can we return to a willingness to try new forms of discernment? Can we develop new skills in the practice of discernment?

### **Theologically literate**

In our earliest days Friends were incredibly theologically literate and willing to talk about God and what their understanding of God led them to. Today we can get very hung up on what the word may or may not mean and spend furious energy on criticising those who do or do not use the word. This may mean that we need to do a number of things in this area.

The first is that we may need to support those who come with baggage about God-talk and understandings of God from other churches. The second is that we need to be willing to listen to everybody's understanding of God and at some stage move to an acceptance that different language, understandings, histories and experiences contribute to our personal perception of what the word God means. Thirdly we will need to accept that amongst Friends we have a broad theological understanding and very diverse experience and crucially that *this is ok*.

Lastly we need to do these things in order to make sense of why we live in the world as we do. Even if we are non-theists or uncomfortable with god language our sense of what we want the world to be is rooted in our theological as well as social understandings of justice, peace, integrity, equality and truth.

Can we engage with one another honestly about our understanding of God and be open to differences from others? Are we willing to once again consider how what we do in the world draws on our understanding of the divine?

### **Spiritually literate**

The narratives suggest that if we spent more time supporting people on their faith journey and inspiring a vision of true community than on roles tasks and infrastructures then we would grow.

It is a rare individual that joins a faith community because they have been inspired by a vision of taking on 6 roles in the meeting, reading an inch worth of papers on a weekly basis, dealing with three phone calls and 12 emails every day, making the coffee, doing the flowers, and organising the shared lift rota.

Can we find ways to develop a stronger cradle to grave supporting process for our spiritual journeying both individually and as a community?

## **Divesting**

As a faith community we have a disproportionate number of properties for our size. Are our buildings working for us or do we mainly work for them? When a local (or indeed the Yearly) meeting spends more time on finance and property than on faith and prophecy it is not surprising we get bogged down. What isn't anchoring us is probably dragging us down and may eventually drown us.

Are we willing to let go of what does not serve us now?

## **Communicating, learning and listening**

There is a huge volume of communications between us making use of a limited range of technologies to support this. Some of this is to do with the passing on of practical information, some of it is knowledge transfer, and some of it is to do with supporting learning in a variety of ways. At the heart of this communication is an implication that we hope that what we have to say or do will be observed or heard by others either within our own community or outside.

How skilled are we at listening to one another? How skilled are we at finding the words that say what is needful? Do we support one another in developing new skills and abilities? Do we make best use of the technologies available to us today that could help in this? How could we better support a teaching ministry?

## **More loving and less fearful**

Fear is the enemy of love. It closes us down, encourages fight or flight (or fright) it acts as obstacle to love, and is ultimately destructive. When we are willing to name and confront our fears and work through them tenderly we come closer to the possibility of love.

What are our greatest fears as a community? What do we already know about confronting fear? What do we know about building love? How can we nurture this?

## **A willingness to be revolutionary as well as evolutionary in terms of spiritual and social transformation with a greater willingness to be open to change**

Historically we were what are known as 'early adapters'. Soon after their emergence we saw the potential of a huge range of new social and material technologies (for example: cooperatives, whale oil, the telephone, modern campaigning, and relief work). Many of these were revolutionary processes and we were either in there at the beginning or saw their potential early on. We were known for our enterprising and entrepreneurial spirit.

We've got stuck on evolution! Whilst it remains important to 'carry' the community when we are making changes to our understanding or undertakings we spend too long resisting change because it is a change.



How can we rediscover our willingness to move beyond what is secure and try radical change? In what ways are we aware that we have a theology of risk?

### **An embodied or practical theology**

Whilst the protestant community traditionally regarded faith as the route to salvation and the orthodox and catholic communities regarded works as the route new churches look to a combination of the two. There is still an emphasis on justification and salvation which sits at odds with the Quaker view of humanity's relationship with God but the idea that worship and witness go hand in hand should be familiar to Friends.

When we move beyond the sole practice of participating in meeting for worship and try to live out our faith in our lives it moves beyond simple observance to something embodied, practical, and vibrant. When what we do in our lives is taken to meeting for worship and held there in the stillness we can be reinvigorated in our endeavours.

In what ways are we willing to try to live out the Quaker way in all that we do? Are we willing to risk suffering or unpopularity either as individuals or as a community?

### **Exploratory and experimental approaches to worship**

Worship grounded in stillness and expectant waiting remains core for us. It may be our personal stories that make us afraid of other forms of worship. It may be that we feel that words with their increasingly slippery use and meanings get in the way.

But are we limiting the opportunities available to us to encounter the divine? Are we unwilling to experiment because silence is easier not because it is more challenging?

### **Fewer structures and infrastructures**

We have incredible layers of infrastructure and structure. Inevitably because these are attached to people's lives and work we are unwilling to address those areas where we have become top heavy, cumbersome, and overly bureaucratic.

How can we go beyond tinkering at the edges and design a structure which is fit for purpose today?

### **A prophetic voice and a willingness to look for more opportunities for real engagement in the world**

We do not simply want to be prophetic about and to ourselves! We need to find new ways of speaking out; building or demonstrating the alternative to the mainstream; celebrating what's already good in wider society; be unafraid of taking symbolic or practical action; and we need to hold on to a vision of the kingdom come.

How will we nurture the prophetic voice?

### **More emphasis on understanding what we do, why we do it, and how we can do it better**

In part this relates to theological and spiritual literacy, but it also relates to what is known as cultural transmission. If we want to understand who we are, what we do, why we do it, as well as the theology that underpins this then we have to find opportunities and ways to talk about this. If we don't develop or spread existing ways of doing this we will lose competence and confidence in our core processes and understandings.

What are we already doing that contributes to shared understandings of our faith and practice? What can we do to enhance our personal and corporate engagement in building a body of understanding? How can we ensure that everyone in the community hears and understands what we are about?

There are many different ways in which we can address these questions – but we have to be willing to take them on board. This takes us onto parts 4 and 5 of the essay.

#### **4. Ownership – how can we 'hear' this?**

Part of our history is that when new ideas, understandings or undertakings were before us we subjected them to testing in the gathered meeting. This crucible was where we tried what it was we might be led to act upon. When we made the decision to go forward we incorporated these into our faith and practice and into our lived lives. We describe these things as our testimony to the world.

Testimony simply means witness. Part of our heritage is that we have discerned corporately agreed areas of witness, (peace, equality, simplicity and truth, integrity, justice and community) these are our testimony in the world.

We have found forms of words for these to varying degrees, but what they are not is simply a set of words, credal statements, or even a set of benchmarks or aspirations against which we measure ourselves. What they come down to is a description of what the Quaker way looks like in day to day living.

We are probably most confident about our corporate testimony to peace, but we have worked with the others to varying degrees over our history. At present what is perhaps weakest is our understanding of community as a form of testimony. And it is to community I think we need to pay attention if we are to live out our spiritual and social vision.

How then do we build community? Do we all need to go and live in the same space (a model town perhaps)? These days we understand that true community isn't necessarily one that is geographically located. But we also know that it is intentional. It is also fairly savvy!

Where there are people there are politics and true community understands personal politics and the conflicts this may engender. It is mature enough to

work with these and transform them. It is also willing to engage with the public political discourse and seek truth with power.

It is economically conscious, understanding that material and human resources (real people) need to be stewarded and nurtured. But it also understands that economic resources are to be deployed for the benefit of the community and should be servant to it.

Ecologically a true community knows that it must take care of the present if there is to be any kind of future. It pays attention to new scientific and material technologies that may help do this but it isn't reliant on them. True community is willing to let go of some external goods as long as it can conserve the internal good. It is willing to pay attention to simplifying in order to be more sustainable in the long run.

Culturally, true community is inclusive, unafraid, diverse, confident, participatory and invigorating. It has a sense of vision and purpose which is shared and understood, it is willing to experiment and change. If a religious community, it is willing to transmit its values and vision and take risks in doing so.

True community is socially aware. It knows where it sits in the wider community; it seeks to engage with it, witness to it, if necessary challenge it and be a countersign, and seeks to model behaviours of benefit to all.

Technology isn't something that true community is afraid of. It is adaptive and adoptive willing to experiment and use something if it serves the community's vision and theology. In particular it will use new communications modes to support its own working and transmission.

Legally, true community will have paid attention to its own structures and resources and will have made provision for legal compliance where this is not at odds with the vision the community has for itself.

When I started thinking about the components of our lives as Friends it struck me was that whilst we may have lost our sense of community now over our first 100 years as the Religious Society of Friends we worked hard at true community.

During this period Quakers tested and discerned their way forward together. They came up with ways of working and practising that still influence us - if you look at each of the above areas you can see that we still benefit from the results of their endeavour as true community today.

What then do we need to do to reinvigorate this amongst Quakers in Britain now? How can we rebuild, own our vision, and become community once again? It may mean that we need to test these ideas.

When we test things in the gathered community we feel confident that these should become part of our faith and practice, the Quaker way.

But we also need to develop some supporting mechanisms to help us do this testing well.

By this I mean that we need some of the frameworks of community in order to do discernment well, even if we are discerning about how to be a better community. I can see this is something of a paradox – but we're not starting from a blank sheet. We already have some important elements of the eight areas described above.

### **5. Undertaking and Understanding: - What would it take to get there?**

As I've already outlined a process of discernment usually results in a new understanding or undertaking. I've already described where I think we need to be and where we currently are. How then do we make the journey from one place to another? In the previous sub-section I talked about testimony, witness and true community and the ways in which, in the past we have tried to live faithful lives through testing new understandings and undertakings.

If we can learn anything from our tradition it is that we have usually been unafraid (eventually) to change and take risks and that when we fail to do so is when we fail all together or altogether fail.

In looking at our own history and other sustainable groups and communities I've seen that there are ten areas that act as a group glue when they are practised. Here then are ten areas I think we have to pay attention to if we are to survive and it's these that I think we need to discern about together.

These practices will lay solid foundations on which to build our future and are the ends in the making as well as the means. Doing these things will support us in becoming a stronger community. If we want to be a confident articulate mature community of vision, purpose and faith then we need to pay attention to the following core things:-

- Distributing power, leadership and authority
- Understanding and agreeing decision making processes
- Understanding and agreeing conflict handling processes
- Nurturing, articulating, and sharing our visions and values
- Working together reflexively
- Practising habits of celebration
- Sharing spiritual practice and journeying
- Creating opportunities for learning
- Engaging in meaningful work
- Exploring and expressing f/Friendship

You may already be confident that you do these things in your meeting or know about them. How confident are you that everyone in your meeting shares this understanding and works in these ways? If you have gaps in understanding or practice do you know what impact this is having on the group?

You'll notice there isn't anything here about any structures or infrastructures that might be needed to support these. Earlier I mentioned that what Friends often said was that if a structure or infrastructure helped us to be inspired or be inspiring then it had some value – this was the bottom line. If it didn't then it had to be examined for other indicators that it was in any way fit for the purpose of spiritual and social transformation!

But we need to decide what we want to be before we decide what structures will support this.

What we do need is good communication, and as highlighted earlier we are helpfully predisposed to communication, story, narrative and other forms of discourse. We may just need to be a bit more strategic and purposeful about it!

We need to engage with these ten areas if we are to develop the skills, attributes and behaviours necessary to being a true community. To do this we have to be willing to transfer knowledge and understanding about these things and where there are existing gaps we have to be willing to recognise, name and address them.

Historically religious groups that have failed have done so for a variety of reasons. But the ones that have succeeded have all paid attention to these ten areas. They may have done it in ways with which we wouldn't agree but they have kept their vision of their faith and practice clear.

If we test and discern the right ways of doing these things then I think we have a sustainable future as the Religious Society of Friends.

### **(Some) Conclusions**

Writing this essay is not the most important part of the journey I've been on over the last few months. What has been significant is getting a much stronger sense of what friends yearn for, what they want their future to consist of and what might act as millstones round our necks unless we pay attention and wake up.

Theories about community and religious evolution sometimes point to organisational restructuring as one of the last things a community does before it implodes. When I started out I had this in mind and didn't want to offer something that was basically a way of tinkering with what currently exists.

Although I found envisioning the future a huge challenge this isn't just because deciding to be prophetic for half an hour to get something down on paper isn't something that comes easily.

What I have found is that it's hard to think out of the box when the box is so well described, seems immutable and inevitable and seems to have come about as part of an evolutionary process.

Many Friends in Britain find it hard to come up with a total story of the possible journey ahead not because they don't have a vision of where we need to be but more because they are currently part of a story that sees itself as evolutionary rather than revolutionary and that dramatic change, indeed any change not considered over a very extended period is wrong.

Nevertheless I am reminded that when the original essay was written what it led to was a revolutionary transformation in the organisational and spiritual life of the yearly meeting. That we can ask ourselves 'what is our future?' suggests that although we may be down we are far from out.

How then can we tell ourselves a more radical revolutionary story? Perhaps it helps to be reminded that the word radical shares the same etymology as the word rooted. If we are truly rooted spiritually we can change our Society, we can be radical and we can be transformed.

Part of the prophetic tradition is to invoke comfort and challenge, call for vision and witness, and inspire testimony and engagement. This essay competition has invited any and all of us to be part of describing and working towards our future. It's a reminder that in the Seventeenth century we did away with the laity and that this means we are all in this together.

Writing this essay hasn't simply been about putting words on paper, for me it has proved a recommitment and conviction that our vision of spiritual and social transformation is inspired and can still be inspiring; that we have the tools, treasures and gifts available to us to make it so; and that if we disencumber ourselves we will be liberating all of us to live up to the light we have, knowing that when we do so more is given to us.

The key to this is discernment. When we engage in this deeply spiritual process we open ourselves to the possibility of transformation. This process is the closest we get to living in true community and it is where we are our most inspired and inspiring.

(9513 words)

