

Report on Inspiration and Practice: the Spiritual Grounding of our Ecumenical and Interfaith Work conference held at Woodbrooke 8th-10th March.

The theme of the conference emerged from the 'Changing Face of Faith in Britain' project and was designed to draw together threads from this project and the 2018 Quaker Committee for Christian and Interfaith Relations (QCCIR) conference as way for setting the scene for the work ahead.

There were three main speakers; Inderjit Bhogal (Methodist Minister), Gretchen Castle (General Secretary Friends World Committee for Consultation FWCC) and Deborah Rowlands.

Each speaker reflected on their ecumenical work to promote peace and Inter-faith understanding.

Inderjit told us he saw ecumenical work as encouraging us to go inwards, helping us clarify our own beliefs and values. He used the humble lentil as a metaphor for the process of being broken down into a Dahl. By being broken down we find what we have in common with others and companionship. He reminded us that doctrine can divide but action, working with other groups, can unite us in common purpose.

Gretchen told us about her UN work and with other International committees. She shared her 'learnings' from these experiences: to keep learning and share what we know; to move to the edge of a situation, but to know when to back off and to suspend judgement; to honour what is but to take risks; to cultivate small circle talking to facilitate understandings.

Deborah shared her experiences of living and working in a small community in rural Wales. She talked about the challenges of dealing with what feels like 'barriers of substantial difference'.

Question and answers sessions gave rise to an interesting reflections of how Quakers were working within ecumenical groups in their areas.

The criteria within some groups for 'Christian' membership and participation highlighted how doctrine can sometimes divide and prevent us working together. For example, the differences in the need to believe in the necessity for baptism or taking Communion or in the Trinity, has prevented unity amongst some groups.

Several Friends spoke of working in collaboration and organising events with other faith groups and visiting mosques and synagogues. Many individuals and Meetings are working to welcome asylum seekers and celebrate the spread of Cities of Sanctuary and networking within Sanctuary Meetings. Several highlighted the importance of finding common ground and standing in solidarity in troubled times.

Following on from this, we broke into small groups to play the Boundary game. We each had to place the name of different faith groups within or without the boundary of a circle on the basis of whether we would a)work with the group, b)possibly, c)definitely not. This led to fascinating discussions – we all said we wished we had more time for this exercise.

Lastly, the QCCIR (see above) asked us to suggest best ways for our Area Meetings to keep in touch with their work. In order to facilitate good mutual communication, QCCIR's suggestions included using: social media networking, reading their newsletter, 'CIRcular' and publications eg 'A Spirit Led Church'.

They also flagged up using the template for submitting to Patterns and Examples stories on Quaker.org.uk. There are examples to view on the British Yearly Meeting (BYM) web page. Submitting our stories here would help us keep in touch and with good ideas in other areas.

Alice Collins

Attended when nominated Friend was prevented.

