

'NEWS FROM SUFFERINGS'

Report of Meeting for Sufferings, held on Saturday 7th July at Friends House in London.

Friends, I hope you will imagine Meeting for Sufferings as being like gardening in the Light - a vision of a carefully tended and mature vegetable garden. At the heart of the garden is a much-loved tree - our book of discipline, Quaker Faith and Practice. And each item on our agenda is some sort of plant or tree that we need to consider. What plants shall we nurture? What new ones shall we plant? Or maybe send to the compost bin?

This report is much longer than usual, because it covers an introduction to Meeting for Sufferings, as well as an account of some of what happened. In the future MfS reports should be much quicker to read!

1. The morning's Induction - an introduction to the garden

Meeting for Sufferings (MfS) in July was the first of the new triennium 2018 - 2021 following Yearly Meeting in May. Usually either me (your MfS representative) or Craig (your alternate MfS representative) will go to these meetings (at Friends House in London), but because this was the first one, we were asked to go together. As it was the first time for many of the roughly 140 people present, the morning was spent in a very well-thought-through induction process. Consequently, for those who are not familiar with the role, function and membership of MFS, I am able to offer a very brief explanation (but please skip the next 3 paragraphs if you know it already - bearing in mind that I don't know what I don't know!).

Meeting for Sufferings (MfS) is the Central Body that acts on behalf of Britain Yearly Meeting (BYM) in between one Yearly Meeting and the next. The way it works is by the spirit-led process with which we are familiar through our own meetings for worship for business. It reviews and tests concerns referred to it by Area Meetings, fostering communication throughout the yearly Meeting in order to decide the priorities and set the direction of the yearly Meeting in the Long Term Framework. So it is a worshipping community that

receives information and takes decisions, informs Friends about its work and helps other parts of Britain Yearly Meeting.

At the next Meeting for Sufferings in October, I gather there will be perhaps just over 100 people: 77 AM representatives, 3 clerks ex-officio, the YM treasurer, the other 14 BYM Trustees, 5 staff ex-officio, and the 2 MfS clerks. There are also representatives from the main central Committees, as well as from General Meetings for Young Friends, Scotland and Wales.

At the moment, BYM and MfS have their roots in the 6 strands of OUR FAITH IN THE FUTURE (leaflets in our Meeting Houses, and on line). By the end of the morning's induction about Meeting for Sufferings itself followed by the work of BYM Trustees, the centrally-managed work and what happens when a minute is sent to MfS, my head was spinning while at the same time I was ready cheer with enthusiasm at such inspiring action.

We met for lunch in small 'Home' groups. We were with all the other reps and alternates from the 7 Area Meetings in Yorkshire, sharing ideas about how to be as prepared as possible for MfS, including taking soundings locally as appropriate, and how we can make the business interesting and relevant to Quakers locally.

After lunch, it was all back together for the main business of the day. I will write about 4 items, of particular interest. This MfS reports, written for our own AM, can flag up items if interest, but cannot cover everything that happened. If you would like to know more, 'The Friend' always reports MfS a very readable way. And if you would like to know chapter and verse about an item - or indeed every item - here is the link to the MfS website where you will find all papers and minutes.

<http://www.quaker.org.uk/mfs>

2. Minutes from Area Meetings: *what shall we nurture? What shall we plant?*

We were asked to consider 2 minutes from Central England AM, and one each from Devon AM and Mid-Wales AM.

Central England's first minute was an affirmation of Quaker Life Central Committee's strategic aims for this coming triennium. They are framed round 'Our Faith in the Future', in which we seek a future where

- Meeting for Worship is the bedrock of living as a Quaker
- Quaker Communities are loving, inclusive and all-age
- Quakers are well known and widely understood.

This 'vision' of our future comes to us via Quaker Life CC with some helpful and thought-provoking possible indicators of success. QLCC welcomed this minute, responding with a hope that more AMs will send feedback on QLCC's aims and work. **Perhaps our own AM might respond to this hope?**

Devon's minute was about the treatment of Palestinian children held in custody by the Israeli military, and MfS was united in agreeing the need for a Quaker response. In 2012 a group of senior UK lawyers visited Israel/Palestine with the support of the Foreign Office to investigate how Palestinian children were treated by the Israeli military when they were detained and kept in custody, which led to a series of recommendations. Devon AM has asked Friends to support calls for a follow-up visit, to review how far the recommendations have been implemented. After some consideration the clerk of Meeting for Sufferings was asked to write to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

Then Central England's second minute, resulting from a minute sent to them by the Community Justice Group (CJG), was about withdrawal of government support for Circles of Support and Accountability which is an innovative, volunteer-based means of supporting registered sex offenders. 'Circles' was a BYM project until becoming an independent organisation in 2008. There was a long consideration of a possible Quaker response, giving a fascinating glimpse of the layers of Quaker work, awareness and wisdom in approaching such difficult and sensitive issues. This was set in the context of the multiple dilemmas arising from the current decimation of the criminal justice service, and the far-reaching cuts to the Probation Service. Responding to Central England AM's minute, and having consulted the clerk of MfS, the Recording Clerk

has written to the Minister of State for the Ministry of Justice making the case for continued funding of this work. MfS asked QPSWCC to keep us updated of any further developments.

Lastly the minute from Mid-Wales brought a concern that Britain Yearly Meeting should now formally recognise many Quaker men and some women, members and attenders, involved in the First World War. Gethin Evans, who has spoken to us today, has gathered detailed information about Quakers (members and attenders or those associated with the Society of Friends) who died as a result of their service during the war. The list includes members of the military, as well as members of the Friends Ambulance Unit (FAU) and Friends War Victims Relief Committee (FWVRC) and conscientious objectors. To date he has information about 264 Friends who died as a result of their experiences in the war, and this number may increase. In due course, the record - a Book of Remembrance - could be lodged in the Friends House Library. This would re-affirm our commitment, in our remembrance of the past, to the truth and to liberty of conscience.

We engaged deeply with the issues arising from this concern. What do we mean by 'the truth' in this context? We were reminded of the National Memorial Arboretum, but there were questions and uncertainties about the wide variety of suffering experienced by Friends as a result of the First World War.

Friends who would like to support and help with the research were encouraged to be in touch with Gethin directly. It was also hoped that AMs will consider this further.

3. Book of Discipline (Red Book) revision: *how shall we renew the tree for the next generation?*

Britain Yearly Meeting in May discerned that now is the right time to embark on a revision of *Quaker Faith and Practice: the book of Christian Discipline of the Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain*. Today MfS was asked to accept the draft terms of reference for the new Book of Discipline Revision Committee, on the basis of Yearly Meeting's Minute 31, as follows:

We ask Meeting for Sufferings to draw up terms of reference for a revision committee, which should be as diverse as possible in its composition. It should include both younger and older Friends. We encourage the group to work flexibly to involve a broad range of contributions of different kinds from Friends.

We ask Meeting for Sufferings to appoint and oversee the work of this committee, expecting to receive regular reports and consultation as necessary at future Yearly Meetings and in other ways.

This was an exciting moment, partly because of the gravity of the subject (the Book of Discipline *really* matters, doesn't it, for its guidance and for its reflective wisdom, inspiration and humour?); and also because Craig, sitting next to me, and the rest of the Preparation Group, have spent many hours on the drafting of these Terms of Reference. Would they be accepted?

We started by considering a wonderful minute sent by Young Friends General Meeting held in Manchester in May. Here is a flavour of that minute:

We are at different points in our journeys and may be well placed to contribute in different ways at different times We feel the spirit leads us to ask Meeting for Sufferings to find creative and accessible ways to engage with Friends and hope that thought will be given as to how to maintain the energy of the Committee We are happy to work with Meeting for Sufferings around these points We hope that if the process continues for some years, space will be made for the voices of children who are becoming teenagers and adults as well as newcomers to the Society.

It was exciting to think that our own Sheffield and Balby young people, together with other young Friends in Yorkshire and with the support of their new Youth Worker, will be so well placed to contribute to this new Book of Discipline for the next generation of Quakers. The terms of reference are in fact a model of clearly and carefully structured clarity and fore-thought, and were positively

welcomed by MfS. The only amendments adopted were to stiffen the requirement for the committee to consult widely ('*should* consult', rather than '*is encouraged* to consult'); and to preface the terms of reference with a clear statement that the work of drafting a new Book of Discipline will be essentially a spirit-led process.

Central Nominations Committee was asked to bring names for a new Book of Discipline Revision Committee to MfS so that work can start in 2019; and we were all asked to hold the Committee in the Light as they set about their task, seeking divine guidance. For anyone interested in getting involved in the revision, go to <https://forms.quaker.org.uk/qfp-idea/>.

As the clerks concluded the minute and we moved on to the next item, there was an almost palpable sense among us of a major step forward having been taken - agreement on a safe structure that will underpin this hugely important and in some senses precarious task of revision. We need to find ways to continue to speak and to listen open-heartedly about our beliefs.

4. BYM Sustainability Group: how can this vital but ailing plant be revived?

In February 2018 our MfS report recorded that members of the BYM Sustainability Group had reported that the huge task of commitment to and support for the Canterbury Commitment cannot be completed in isolation and needs to be embedded into the fabric of BYM. One of the ways this might be taken forward is by involving AMs more directly. So MfS was asked to endorse a proposal from Quaker Stewardship Committee to ask Area Meeting Trustees to monitor their carbon use and report on on this in their annual reports.

In April 2017 it was acknowledged by MfS that

Asking for reports to provide information about, for example, sustainability, would require clear guidelines to enable consistency.

So now MfS has agreed that Area Meeting Trustees be encouraged (NB not required) to report on sustainability actions in their annual reports; and there are indeed guidelines from Quaker Stewardship Committee about how to do this, which do de-mystify the proposal, together with an offer of help and support from members of the BYM Sustainability Group to any AM that would like to consider doing this. It was also emphasised that monitoring and reporting on carbon use is not the only strategy available to meetings in this respect, and that MfS would be delighted to hear of any other current initiatives.

5. Notices: *the potting shed 'to do' list*

- AMs are asked to send a representative to the BYM Sustainability Gathering
Bridging the gap: hope and action
19 - 21 October 2018 at Swanwick
- Next MfS is on Saturday 6th October, and will run concurrently with Young People's Participation Day. Representatives are asked to bring one or two young people aged 14-16, and older young people are most welcome too. Main agenda items will include diversity and inclusion, investments profiting from the occupation of the West Bank, and sustainability.

Conclusion : *how's the day been?*

It was a fascinating day, with two strands coming up again and again. One was the need for simplicity; and the other, inclusion and diversity. These two themes generated a real sense of coherence and direction. While inclusion and diversity are becoming increasingly familiar themes now in our communities. the very first ministry of the day, about simplicity, arose from this brief and memorable extract from the BYM Trustees report:

In the historic hall of Swarthmoor Hall, we were led to a vision of a simple church supported by a simple charity to reinvigorate Quakerism. So the priority for BYM in the coming

period would be to simplify the governance of the charity and for the charity to support the church in simplifying its structures and ways of working. The revision of the book of discipline provides an opportunity to do this, bringing greater diversity, inspiration, connection and renewal.

Friends, what might a simpler garden look like?

Rosie Roberts and Craig Barnett

AM Meeting for Sufferings representative and alternate