

Quaker Life Representative Council held 11-13 October 2019 on the Theme of Mental Health

This was the third Rep Council about building Inclusive Quaker Communities. The first was before I was a rep for our Area Meeting, and was on including children so we become all age communities. The second, last April, was on including people whatever their race, colour, ethnicity, gender, including people whose gender is ambiguous, whatever their sexual orientation and whatever their background, such class, education etc. Because it contained such a wide range of different areas, and because it was when I was newly appointed as a rep, I did not realise until this time that it was one of a series.

This Quaker Life Rep council on Mental Health had the sub title Embracing the Elephant in the room. It looked at three areas.

The first was the experience of Quakers with a mental health problem, including both good and bad experiences in relation to their local meeting.

The second area was the experience of Quaker carers of people with mental health problems. Some one looking after a family member with acute depression, bi polar or schizophrenia can have a very tough time, more so than the carer of someone with a physical disability. It is also tough when they go to meeting and get asked about how is the family member but not asked: how are you? How are you coping?

Thirdly dealing with people who come to our meetings or meeting house and present challenging behaviour whether a Quaker or not.

The first Quaker Life Rep Council I went to, I came away buzzing with new ideas, inspiration and excitement. This topic was not like that.

The overall tone of this representative council was of quite caring love. As Quakers we may not get things right all of the time but we care.

We heard many stories both good and bad, both as documents in advance and at the rep council.

Of four booklets issued to us, the one I found by far the best is "Encounters with Mental Distress, Quaker stories, developed by the Mental Health Cluster of Quaker Life Network. It is first-hand accounts of Quakers personal experience in relation to mental health, and meetings experience both good and bad of coping with people with mental health problems. Some of the accounts are only a paragraph or two long, so it is an easy book to start reading and some of the accounts are so moving, I found it really gripping reading.

As well as the speakers, there was plenty of opportunity to share and hear about the personal experience of those of us at rep council. For example one of the workshops I went to was a game/exercise of dilemmas we may encounter and it opened the topic for many people to share their own or their meeting's experience of similar situations. Zee-Zee shared some of the stories at Area Meeting.

The last session in our home groups we discussed how to do things better and came up with the following list:

Ask a person what they would like: don't make assumptions

Use the internet to research some basic information about the Friend's condition.

Often listening and understanding support is better than helpful advice and suggestions however well intentioned

Be practical for example by providing the phone numbers of emergency helplines or taking the baby of a woman suffering from post natal depression to hospital to visit her.

Make friendship links or in other ways monitor the situation to keep up to date, and ask again what they need.

Small acts of kindness for example sending a card can be disproportionately appreciated.

Welcome the person back and ask how they are afterwards.

Finally it is useful for the whole meeting or as many as possible in the meeting to do a course in mental health first aid.

As Quaker Life rep council was at Woodbrooke, Woodbrooke took the opportunity to update us that the demand for its courses is now more in local meetings and on-line rather than at Woodbrooke itself. So they asked us to spread the word that Woodbrooke is looking for suggestions about new Quaker uses for Woodbrooke. Do speak to or send in your ideas to Simon Best head of learning at Woodbrooke.