

**Report to Sheffield & Balby Area Meeting, March 2019**  
**‘Answering that of God in everyone’: A diversity and inclusion national gathering - 18-20 January 2019**

**Report from Fred Langridge**

This gathering of about eighty Friends had most of the content stuffed into Saturday, to allow for day attenders, and for processing and quiet reflection on the Sunday morning. That was a very good call: there was an awful lot to process.

Friday evening

Edwina Peart, the Diversity and Inclusion Project Coordinator employed by Britain Yearly Meeting, gave an introduction to the content and context of the gathering. Yearly Meeting in 2017 had been very clear that Quakers in Britain needed to examine our diversity and take action on being more inclusive. Edwina sketched the history of British Quakers’ conversations about equality and inclusion over the centuries, including our relationship with colonialism and with slavery.

She also introduced the concept of intersectionality - thinking about how different structures of power and oppression in our society overlap and interact with each other, and how these affect individuals. This idea originated in a ‘class action’ employment lawsuit in the US, where it became clear that black women were being discriminated against; they couldn’t sue on the grounds of race because black men were being employed, or of gender because white women were being employed.

Edwina encouraged us to think about breadth and specificity in our efforts to be inclusive. For example, Quakers think we ‘do well on disability’

because we have provision for deaf people and wheelchair users at Yearly Meeting, but a lot of disabled people are still practically excluded from Quaker events.

We were asked to consider in relation to the gathering:

What identities are you bringing with you?

What feelings are you bringing with you?

What do you hope to receive?

What are you willing to invest?

## Saturday

The first talk on Saturday was from Robert Beckford, an academic and broadcaster who is also a Pentecostal Christian. His talk, 'What Can the Quakers learn from Critical Whiteness Studies?' was extremely engaging: ideas that some people in the room hadn't encountered at all before. He talked about whiteness being a social construction - it's not all about skin colour, and the borders are different at different times and in different places. He also talked about the problems created by whiteness being invisible because it's the unspoken default. Robert's take-home message was that critical views of whiteness empower everyone, even if these conversations are difficult to begin with.

Next, Sabah Choudrey talked about trans and gender diversity in general, and the experience of being a trans, brown, British Muslim in more particular. Parts of this were very personal, with some really interesting reflections on being (newly) seen by others as a man and how that felt, and about 'reclaiming' Islam after moving away because they had expected to experience transphobia and homophobia. Sabah talked about the 'invisible rucksack' analogy for privilege - each of us carrying around a bag with a different selection of unearned assets that make life easier -

maps, phrasebooks, passports, blank cheques. We don't choose which we have, but they affect our life experience all the time.

In the afternoon we could pick any two of four workshop sessions: I went to one on class, and one on applying Quaker theology to guilt associated with privilege. Both gave me loads to think about. We often say that 'typical' Quakers are very middle class, but the personal stories in the class workshop made it clear that there's already a lot of diversity in Quakers' experience of class. One lesson was that we should stop making assumptions about each other.

My main takeaway from the 'guilt' workshop was that we inherit the consequences of, say, racism and sexism, but should accept responsibility to do something about them rather than wallowing in guilt about a history we can't change.

After the evening meal was Lynne Cullens, a working-class vicar of an Anglican church in a working-class area, talking about class and leadership in the church. Her talk was good and interesting although a bit tricky to translate from Anglican to Quaker contexts; the question-and-answer session felt a bit like a lot of very tired and overloaded people who'd had a very intense day...

Sunday morning was a welcome time of reflection before we all went home.

All the breaks were filled with conversations about the content of the sessions. Although there were some moments of conflict, it felt like people were there to learn and change and work out practical things to do. There was a big feeling of solidarity and support among those of us who are and have been working really hard on aspects of this.

Some of the practical ideas I came away with:

Having conversations and making minutes of intention about how we can move forward.

Finding ways to show our imperfections in public, while sharing what Quakers have to offer (maybe in a context like Quaker Quest).

Inviting all the groups that use the Meeting House to a social time of sharing, with no agenda.