

Quaker Life Representative Council 26 to 28 April 2018

This was my first ever Quaker Life Rep Council and on Friday evening there was an over view of Quaker Life, to update people and to bring new people like myself up to speed.

The purpose of Quaker Life Rep Council is

to provide an opportunity to learn about the work of Quaker Life;

to provide an opportunity to meet people from other Area Meetings; and

to be a channel of communication in both directions.

Quaker Life has three sections to its work: Friends House Library and archives; Children and Young Peoples work; and every thing else, which comes under the title of Ministry and Outreach. Ministry and Outreach has under it Faith and practice; Diversity and inclusion; Meeting house staff; Outreach; and Pastoral care.

After the overview on Friday evening, the rest of the weekend was on the theme of diversity and inclusion, ably led by Edwina Peart the Quaker Life diversity and inclusion co-ordinator.

She pointed out, the tabular statements, only tell us the number and sex of members. They don't provide any information about how diverse or homogeneous we are. Edwina Peart wanted a baseline audit to find out more. So she organised a survey, which attracted some criticism. She read out one letter., as an example. Privilege can bring fear, I assume because the more privilege you have, the more you have to loose. 90% of the people most fearful and prickly about looking at this diversity agenda were white, male, middle-class and comfortably off.

10% of Quakers filled in the survey. From the survey and from visiting Area Meetings, which she did a lot of in her first year, she has found that Quakers overwhelmingly have a powerful desire for love and inclusion but do not always translate this into good practise and action.

But it is not all weak, some Quakers have built on our long history in pioneering diversity and inclusion and there is much good practise that already exists.

I had gone to Rep Council rather ambivalent about the theme, fearful that the weekend would be about making white educated middle-class Quakers feel uncomfortable about being relatively privileged. So to tell us early on that Quakers overwhelmingly have a powerful desire for love and inclusion but don't know how to

translate this into good practise, brought me on board. From there I was happy to look at what bias I might be carrying and how to overcome it.

The weekend talked about unconscious bias. If we want to become more inclusive and diverse, one of the first steps is to identify and acknowledge our unconscious bias. This is a process rather than a once and for all action. Because it is unconscious it can sometime take an incident to show it up. For example, Edwina who is black told us about when she went to a parents evening at her son's school, one of the teachers starting talking to her about how surprisingly gifted her son is at English. Edwina immediately assumed the teacher was surprised because her son is black. After the teacher had talked for a while about how gifted he was and his potential, she summed up by saying it was really unusual to have a **boy** so gifted in English. And Edwina suddenly saw the unconscious bias she was carrying. So we all carry unconscious bias.

Another thing we can watch out for is whether our conversation is making a genuine connection or contains "micro aggression". For example, suppose a 13 year old turns up at Meeting for Worship on the second Sunday of a month for the first time ever and is greeted with "oh we only make provision for young people on the first Sunday of the month, there is no provision for you today". It maybe true but it is not the way to start a conversation. Imagine saying the same thing to a disabled person: "oh we only have wheel chair access on the first Sunday of the month, there is no provision for you today"

Another example of micro aggression is when white people fearful of being racist go overboard with niceness to a black person. Although this is slightly better than hostile racism, for the person on the receiving end it is still uncomfortable. It is still treating the person differently because they are black.

What we should strive for is a deep authentic conversation with the person we are talking to, where the person does not feel judged

Thinking about this when I got home, avoiding micro aggression seemed at first to be about being super aware and super sensitive 100% of the time, and seemed an impossibly high standard. I know I can be insensitive to people with out any intention to be. While I was mulling this all over, suddenly I was reminded of Basil Fawlty in Fawlty Towers. He would do everything he could to make guests welcome EXCEPT make a genuine connection with them. "Are you sure you have enough pillows?" "Are you really sure?" etc. But he couldn't make genuine connection if he tried. What he does is part of his personality and is it also unconscious bias? Thinking about it I decided it is not unconscious bias because he is like that with everyone. Unconscious bias is about treating someone differently because of a label rather than connecting with the person behind the label. So going back to the example of Edwina and the school teacher, her assumption was unconscious bias because she wouldn't have made the same immediate assumption if the teacher had been black. So in my case when I discover I have been insensitive, I

can ask myself, would I have been more aware if in some way or other the person had been more like me, or would I have been equally insensitive with anyone one else? It is still not good to be insensitive but it is somewhat reassuring to know that not every time I have been insensitive it is due to unconscious bias.

I want to raise two more points and a helpful idea.

The first one is, to look at how welcoming we are when someone from a somewhat different background does walk through our doors. For example if we are quite an elderly meeting, do we occasionally get a younger person who comes for a few weeks and then stops coming? If our Meeting is very white, have we ever had anyone from a different racial background who came for a few weeks and then stopped? If yes, that suggests we are not being welcoming of this diversity.

And secondly what are we doing to prepare for those occasions? After 9/11 in New York, the churches, mosques, synagogues, Hindu, Jain and Buddhist temples, Gujarats etc were all full, but after a few weeks they were back to their usual numbers. What are we doing to prepare ourselves so that if/when a wider diversity comes, they feel comfortable and genuinely welcome?

In order to make genuine connection with someone it helps to know a bit about them. Hope Valley Meeting after worship ask for news of absent Friends. But one meeting has instead changed this to asking has anyone got any joys or sorrows to share? As well as helping to get to know people on the fringe, it has greatly enriched the meeting to know more about what is going on for each other.