

## 'NEWS FROM SUFFERINGS'

Report of a Meeting for Sufferings (MfS), held at Friends House in London  
on 02 February 2019

During opening worship we were reminded of these words: *"Are you honest and truthful in all you say and do? ..... Our responsibilities to God and our neighbour may involve us in taking unpopular stands. Do not let the desire to be sociable, or the fear of seeming peculiar, determine your decisions "* (Advices and Queries 37 and 38).

Main items for this February meeting were: to approve Terms of Reference for two new MfS groups, one of which was the Meeting for Sufferings Sustainability Monitoring Group, responsible for monitoring the Yearly Meeting's commitment to Sustainability; **the Post Truth World - Truth and Integrity in the Public Sphere; BYM 2019**; appointments (including membership of the **Book of Discipline Revision Committee**); BYM Trustees; the current system of Area Meeting representation on MfS; new Quaker Recognised Bodies; Minutes received from AMs & GMs (including from Friends in Wales GM and Hampshire and Islands AM regarding Quakers in WW1), and from North Somerset AM regarding **Simpler meetings**; and the Central Nominations Committee review.

This report is mainly about 4 of those items. For those who would like to know more details, or the minuted outcome of items, there are full papers and minutes at <<https://www.quaker.org.uk/our-organisation/meeting-for-sufferings/papers-and-minutes>> . Also see the item in 'The Friend' (8 February 2019, pp 6-7). Incidentally, The Friend has a new editor, a new format and a radically new approach - very much worth a look, not least for a thought-provoking review in the same issue, of James Cary's 'The Sacred Art of Joking', by Rosie Carnall.

### 1. The Post Truth World - Truth and Integrity in the Public Sphere

This concern was first raised by Southern Marches AM in a minute brought to Sufferings in April 2018, stating their concern about "a lack of honesty in public affairs; and that in turn this impacts on how we live Quaker values in the world". Last year MfS decided to test this concern more widely with AMs; and the Southern Marches minute, together with briefing papers, was circulated, asking for further discernment and news of any work already being done. Now MfS has received formal minutes on this matter from 42 out of our 70 AMs (including from us).

This MfS was asked: "What can Friends offer in a post-truth world?" We share this post-truth concern with a great many other people and organisations. The question is about our *capacity* to respond. In relation to working with others, Nick Perks, trust secretary of the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, had put together a very helpful paper (circulated as Appendix 2), about organisations already active in this area. Stevie Krayner, clerk of Southern Marches AM, introduced this item; and we had time to consider what we, as Quakers and as Britain Yearly Meeting, are able to do in response to the ideas and reflections we have received.

Very varied responses were evident in the open ministry that followed (helpfully reflected in the account of this item in the Friend). Here are a few examples: challenging views on social media can lead to abuse and threats - perhaps we need courage, and awareness to support each other; it can be quite a challenge to know what IS the truth; post-truth may be defined as 'relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal beliefs'; the immediacy of social media tends to generate an instant evolutionary 'fight or flight' response, and a logical and reasoned response to 'fight or flight' may not be the only, or even the most effective, way to engage with those with whom we disagree; what is happening is terrifying, and we must *do something*; on the other hand, social media can be a tool to spread truth; as Quakers, how should we respond?

We were reminded about our current centrally-managed work on commitment to transparency, which currently involves working with other civil society organisations to challenge regulations which limit the ability of civil society to speak truth to power. This is about speaking out, working with others. But we also need to acknowledge our own complicity in the problem, and be careful of our own assumptions of rightness. Maybe we need to do more listening, less telling.

The minute concludes: "We do not suggest any new committee or programme of work at this time but hope that our representatives will share, within their area meetings, the information contained

in Appendix 2 of relevant organisations with whom we may work". So, F/friends, please do contact me if you would like a copy.

## **2. Britain Yearly Meeting 24-27 May 2019**

We heard that Yearly Meeting in May will be an opportunity for F/friends to examine our privilege and assumptions of privilege, in particular how privilege impacts our ability to act on our urgent Quaker concerns regarding climate justice and sustainability, and inclusion and diversity. Information about going is on the BYM website, and also available from F/friends in our meetings, many of whom are hoping to go. In this context we might want to bear in mind that the main focus of the recently established Meeting for Sufferings Sustainability Monitoring Group would seem to be on the centrally managed work of the Society. Perhaps the remaining question is "what about the responses of individuals and meetings to the Canterbury commitment, now in 2019?" Knowing that discernments on climate justice and sustainability will be among main items at BYM makes it all the more compelling for as many of us to attend as possible - and for those who cannot, also to get involved in the BYM processes of preparation, holding in the Light, and follow-up during the summer.

Also in preparation for BYM, all F/friends are also urged please to complete the online inclusion and diversity survey at [www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/quakersurvey](http://www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/quakersurvey)

If you have already done it, thank you. If not, perhaps you could consider it? F/friends at meeting are happy to offer help if needed.

## **3. Membership of the Book of Discipline Revision Committee**

The full complement for this committee was appointed (in addition to the co-clerks already appointed in November), and in the process we discovered what an inspiring group it will be. We heard how important and difficult the multidimensional task had been for the Central Nominations Committee, because they were discerning not only the right people with the right skills but also the right spread in terms of age, geography, gender and language. Out of 200 names offered, 24 names were brought to MfS for appointment. Three members of our own AM are among those appointed: Craig Barnett, Jessica Hubbard-Bailey and Rosie Carnall (who is appointed as co-clerk). The new committee varies in age from 16 to 76, and includes Chris Alton, the artist and author of last year's radical Swarthmore Lecture *Changing ourselves, changing the world*. 4 of the younger members were appointed until 2022, and the rest until the end of the process.

## **4. Simpler meetings: a simple church supported by a simple charity, to reinvigorate Quakerism**

This item was in response to a minute from North Somerset AM who had considered the BYM initiative to help make our meetings simpler to run. While not ready yet to make specific proposals, the AM "unites with the concern to encourage BYM to look again at our structures and organisation, which could reduce the administrative load on Trustees and Area Meetings". This concern seems to be starting to take root in some other areas, including our own. I mentioned in the November MfS report that Paul Parker will be with us at Quakers in Yorkshire in Doncaster on Saturday 27th April, when this will be on the agenda. Perhaps an unmissable day if you are intrigued by the chance to explore ideas about simpler structures and reinvigorating Quakerism?

### **Walking courageously .....**

In opening worship we were also reminded of these precious familiar words: *"Be patterns, be examples in all countries, places, islands, nations, wherever you come ..... then you will walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in everyone"*. During the day we heard about our need to be more in touch with the love and truth within us, our need for the courage and vision to listen more, and prayerfully discern what our values are; and to learn to proclaim them simply. It was suggested that when George Fox had said "walk cheerfully", perhaps he didn't *just* mean "smile at everyone". Perhaps we might think he also meant something like *"walk courageously over the world, answering that of God in everyone"*.

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