

## **'NEWS FROM SUFFERINGS'**

Report of a Meeting for Sufferings (MfS), held at Friends House in London  
on 06 July 2019

Main items to mention this time, especially as they all ask for some sort of response by us, are: feedback from BYM 2019; gender diversity; 2 minutes from AMs; BYM trustees planning 'Beyond vibrancy'; and young peoples' participation. Full papers and minutes of these and other items of especial interest can be found at <<https://www.quaker.org.uk/our-organisation/meeting-for-sufferings/papers-and-minutes>> ; and also see items in 'The Friend'

During the morning we heard these words from Quaker Faith and Practice 23.47:

*"What is important is that institutions and their administration be constantly tested against human values, and that those who are concerned about these values be prepared to grapple with the complex realities of modern society as it is "*

Grigor McClelland (1976)

### **1. Feedback from BYM 2019**

We heard a range of perspectives, including about the discipline and grace of the clerking team as a helpful model for our other (very much smaller) Meetings for Worship for Business; and - in a gathered meeting of over a thousand people - experiencing the sheer scale of stillness. We were reminded of the transforming process through which we were guided: about privilege and dis-privilege; our climate emergency; about acting not out of shame and guilt, but out of joy and love; a wonderful all-age Godly Play story; and the burning 'where will we go next?' question. The Sufferings minute for this item ends with the following extract from BYM 2019 Minute 33:

*"We call on Friends throughout our Yearly Meeting to continue this work in our meeting communities, to deepen and extend the work we have done, so that we can be the community we need to be to face the future. We encourage local and area meetings to share their insights"*

### **2. Gender diversity**

We received from Young Friends General Meeting (YFGM) their minute 2019.2.3 'Trans and non-binary inclusion'; and from Quaker Life Central Committee (QLCC) an initial statement 'Quakers and Gender Diversity'. This item was not for decision this month, but taken in preparation for more extended discernment at MfS in October.

These two documents are not entirely united in their view. (The full text of both can be found at <<https://www.quaker.org.uk/our-organisation/meeting-for-sufferings/papers-and-minutes>>). The papers before us included a 1-hour workshop format that Friends with Eldership and Oversight responsibilities could run in their Quaker communities. QLCC would like to hear more personal stories and 'think-pieces' that might emerge from such workshops, and we are urged to reflect and discuss together, and to send contributions including notes or minutes of discussions to [gender@quaker.org.uk](mailto:gender@quaker.org.uk), or by post to Gender Responses, Quaker Life, Friends House, 173 Euston Road, London NW1 2BJ. (While Quaker Life will need to know the source of contributions, they will remain entirely confidential).

We were asked to remember that we are Friends with each other and to treat ourselves and this sacred community with gentleness and love as we go forth. It was emphasised that words matter, and so does the ability to hear "where the words come from. While we cannot hope to be perfect in attaining this, we seek to try what love can do".

Meanwhile Area Meetings are asked "What specific Quaker contribution, that comes from our faith, can we make to this debate?". Sufferings will return to this in October.

### **3. Minutes received from AMs**

Three stirring minutes on sustainability had been sent to MfS, from Bristol AM, West Weald AM and Southern Marches AM (available to view at <<https://www.quaker.org.uk/our-organisation/meeting-for-sufferings/papers-and-minutes>>). In our discernment on these minutes we were asked "What is a uniquely *Quaker* perspective? Is it our testament to simplicity? Can we deliberately develop examples of a positive vision of what a simple life looks like? These questions chimed with the Swarthmore lecturer's exhortation about acting not out of shame and guilt, but out of joy and love. Do we, in Sheffield and Balby, have our own uniquely Quaker perspective on sustainability?

Staffordshire AM had sent a minute about extending funding for another year for the Sanctuary Everywhere project. For three years its annual budget of £75,000 has been financed from the central legacy fund and expires on 31 December 2019. One more year's funding would enable the project to continue to provide support, resources and advice; and crucially to develop more infrastructure, tools and resources to make the work sustainable when the project ends. In February, Quaker Peace and Social Witness Central Committee (QPSWCC) minuted strong support for the work, and agreed to fundraise, while acknowledging it can only continue with extra funding or by laying down other work. A fundraising programme has been launched, and in addition Sanctuary Meetings are being asked to help by making an additional financial gift or by organising a special fundraising activity to support this work.

### **4. BYM Trustees planning 'Beyond Vibrancy'**

'Reviewing the Vibrancy in Meetings project' was on Sufferings agenda in April, and was included in the April report (item 2). It was set up as one response to some of the challenges faced by the yearly meeting including declining and ageing membership patterns, reports of the growing demand placed on (and difficulty in finding) role holders at local and area meeting level and research indicating a disconnect between some aspects of local and national work. The project's evaluation report in April was very positive and well received; while at the same time noting limitations that will need to be addressed.

Since then, Trustees of BYM and of Woodbrooke have spent a weekend together considering a new vision for the future, reshaping both BYM and Woodbrooke to fit the new realities - demographic, cultural, financial, internal and external. - facing Quakerism in Britain in the 3rd decade of the twenty-first century. How will the two organisations work together to support Quaker meetings and communities? The answers they propose contain quite a radical re-structuring, in which both organisations aim to work more closely together. They will need to:

- radically change the way they support meetings (and other Quaker communities), and the individuals who are part of those communities.
- Work together in an integrated way that goes beyond just 'partnership' working.

To do this, they will need to

- extend and expand the current model of locally based development workers (the Vibrancy project model) so that there is a local development worker within reach of every meeting in Britain, within 5 years.
- Work rapidly towards more local support for meetings and begin to experiment with new bases, hubs or clusters across the yearly meeting (possibly, for instance, in Yorkshire).

These ideas, though generating a range of questions and observations, were received thoughtfully and mainly positively by Sufferings. We should not underestimate the impact of these changes on staff. Do we have the right policies? What about digital systems? Even with dedicated staff, building the new culture will take time. How do Trustees define 'within reach'? For places like Aberystwyth and the Shetlands, this will be welcome but challenging. How does this plan address the problem of recruiting new members? What about outreach?

We heard that the capacity and infrastructure needed to manage change well should not be underestimated. Caroline Nurse, clerk to Trustees, told us that change is both exciting and frightening; and we need to change "not too fast, and not too much". Speaking of evolution rather than revolution, and adding "but moderately fast!", she said "While we have resources to enable the management of change, now is the time".

On a personal note, I listened to all this with a growing sense of excitement and also relief. There is increasing awareness of dwindling members and resources in an ever more complex and challenging world; and somehow it felt appropriate that Trustees' response should be spirit-led, radical, and carefully discerned - it felt like Quaker history in the making. The vision is that our worship and witness continue to thrive; and we were assured that from now on this matter will be a standing item on Trustees and Sufferings agendas. Look out for more exciting episodes to come!

#### **4. Young peoples' participation**

Finally, at the end of the afternoon came a very important item introduced by Paul Parker (Recording Clerk). It had arisen as a result of a minute from Kendal and Sedburgh AM in relation to the way that we count 16-18 year olds' attendance, for the tabular statement. However Paul broadened the question into a wider debate about young peoples' (surely 13-18 rather than just 16-18?) relationships with their Quaker communities; about their own sense of identity in the Society (rather than how their meetings decide to categorise them); why the expectation that young people should conform to our own 'traditional' ways of doing things, instead of us changing - at least sometimes - to fit in with them; and so on. This led to a rich discussion and sharing of strategies that have helped meetings to work with their young people. It was suggested that this was about questions of self-identity. What is it, to be a Friend? How do we all express ourselves as F/friends?

The next Meeting for Sufferings will be at Woodbrooke in October. If you have any questions, comments, ideas, suggestions between now and then, please do email me or Craig Barnett, or catch us at Meeting. Thank you.

*Rosie Roberts* (rosemarymroberts@gmail.com)  
*Meeting for Sufferings representative, Sheffield and Balby Area Meeting*  
*July 2019*