

## 'NEWS FROM SUFFERINGS'

Report of a Meeting for Sufferings (MfS), held at Friends House, London  
on 7th December 2019

This 'News' is a little different from usual. Sufferings is experimenting with taking all the central committees' annual reports in one meeting (this year in December), rather than scattering them throughout the year. December's agenda looked rather daunting in prospect, but actually was fascinating; not least in the way a committee's report so often, though without overlapping, related to the work of other committees. So rather than report on separate items, I have written - briefly - about three themes that kept recurring throughout the day. Firstly, it was **Young People's Participation Day**, and the presence of over 30 Young Friends gave a certain dynamism to the day's proceedings. A second theme was about **diversity and inclusion**, and a third about **climate justice**.

Full papers and minutes can be found at <<https://www.quaker.org.uk/our-organisation/meeting-for-sufferings/papers-and-minutes>> ; and also see items in 'The Friend' dated 13.12.19 and 20.12.19. There you will find accounts of proceedings under the usual headings. As well as the Central Committee reports, other interesting matters included a discussion about whether the term 'overseer', with its negative overtones, is an appropriate one, especially at this challenging time; about the central nominations process; about the BYM Trustees report, with the budget introduced with great clarity by Linda Batten; and about the issue of assisted dying.

At the start of the day and in the company of Young Friends, from our elder we heard the the last part of the Epistle of Junior Yearly Meeting, 1991:

*"We realised that we are individuals and that we are alone but, as part of a loving community, to be alone does not necessarily mean to be lonely. We discovered that it is acceptable to have confused feelings, to be different, to do things our own way. We should not feel guilty when we are wrong, and appreciate that there must be room for mistakes. There are people who want us to be exactly as we are".*

### 1. Young People's Participation Day

Part of the opening session was a 'Getting to Know You' exercise introduced by Spencer King, co-clerk of Junior Yearly Meeting. We were encouraged to discuss a number of questions: What is your most significant Quaker memory? What helps you feel like you belong to your Quaker community? What do you treasure most about Meeting for Worship? and How has Quakerism made a difference to your life? I was in a group of three for this discussion, and we found these questions very powerful in unlocking our thoughts and sharing with each other - I have found myself dwelling on them now and then since. At the end of the day Spencer told us that the young people had spent much of the day exploring how discernment works in Quaker business decision-making, as well as in their daily lives. Part of their minute read "The .... day was a great opportunity to explore how discernment can bring together the community ..... and can support our personal decision-making".

I felt that having so many young people with us significantly alters the dynamic, making the whole meeting fresh, and more open to new light. There is a deliberate and very welcome move to ensure that more young voices are heard at Sufferings, not just annually but throughout the year.

## **2. Diversity and inclusion,**

This theme was evident in Central Committee reports, and responses to them. We heard about a distressing example of exclusion in the report from the Quaker Committee for Christian and Interfaith Relations, in relation to Churches Together in England (CTE). Hannah Brock Womack, (Sheffield and Balby AM, Nether Edge LM) had been selected as a presidential nominee for CTE, but her appointment has been unacceptable to some other churches in membership of CTE, because of Hannah's (same-sex) marriage. Many friends have expressed disappointment and anger about the situation, and concern for Hannah and her partner. Hannah spoke most inspiringly about her responses to the situation; and we heard from Paul Parker (Recording Clerk) about BYM's responses to CTE. "We have expressed sadness and disappointment, making it clear that the situation is unacceptable to us; that we are not giving up on ecumenicism (a response much valued by some other Churches); and that we recognise that this takes time. It takes patience and persistence to stay in the room".

Emma Roberts, clerk of Quaker Life Central Committee, included in her report a plea that AMs continue to discuss and discern our responses to the gender diversity (trans inclusion) consultation. We heard moving statements from members of QLCC about how to create welcoming inclusive spaces for all. It is evident that we are not in unity in the Society. One friend said "I hope Friends can love each other"; while another said that hearing people's stories enables us to express sympathy in ways that are not always possible with "a more philosophical approach".

## **3. Climate justice**

This third persistent theme ran like a thread through everything. We heard from Quaker Peace and Social Witness (QPSW) about the Sanctuary Everywhere programme in support of refugees and migrants; and Trevor Evans, who presented the report, said that climate justice was moving up the political agenda and is sure to be a core strategic factor. He emphasised the effects of climate change on poorer people, and drew our attention to the opportunities presented by the COP26 climate conference in Glasgow in November 2020. We heard about one Friend's visit to the inspirational Centre for Alternative Technology, and we were warmly recommended to explore a new research report 'Zero Carbon Britain', obtainable on line at <https://www.cat.org.uk/info-resoutces>

The next Meeting for Sufferings will be in London on 1st February 2020. If you have any questions, comments, ideas or suggestions between now and then, please do email me or Craig, or catch us at Meeting. Thank you.

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December 2019*

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