

'NEWS FROM SUFFERINGS'

Report of a Meeting for Sufferings, held at Woodbrooke in Birmingham
on 23-25 November 2018

"We need to rise to the challenges of being a small and shrinking Society in a struggling, secular world" *Ingrid Greenhow, clerk of BYM Trustees*

Main items for this November weekend meeting were reports from central and standing committees, and the issues that concern them at present: Church Government Advisory Group, Quaker Committee for Christian and Interfaith Relations, Quaker Life, Quaker Peace and Social Witness, Quaker World Relations, BYM Trustees, and Committee on Clerks. Other items included reports from other European Yearly Meetings, 'Speaking Out', and Living up to our sustainability commitment.

This report is mainly about three of those items. For those who would like to know more details, or the outcome of other items, there are full papers and minutes at <https://www.quaker.org.uk/our-organisation/meeting-for-sufferings/papers-and-minutes>. And 'The Friend' always reports on Sufferings (see 30 Nov. & 7 Dec 2018).

1. BYM Trustees strategic priorities

Underpinning the strategic priorities enthusiastically endorsed by Meeting for Sufferings is "a simple church supported by a simple charity to reinvigorate Quakerism". The clerk of BYM trustees mentioned that they know lots of meetings who are struggling to attract young people, adding "I'm pretty sure no-one was attracted to Quakerism for its long list of jobs". The three new priorities for action are 'Thriving Quaker Communities'; 'A sustainable and peaceful world'; and 'Simple structures and practice'. *How* will all the work be done? It needs to be 'Distinctly Quaker'; 'Integrated'; and 'Well-governed'. During this item the idea of regionalisation was also aired, with trustees asking "could some of the roles in Friends House be 'devolved' to regions? This idea was echoed in the Yorkshire 'home group' where we wondered about how we might simplify the existing extensive Trustee structures in Yorkshire Area Meetings. (Paul Parker - Recording Clerk - will be talking about this at Quakers in Yorkshire quarterly meeting in Doncaster on Saturday 27th April; and if you think the subject might be dull, perhaps think again as he is never dull!). Paul mentioned a disconnect (for years) between Friends at the national level and Friends on the ground, and that Friends House seemed 'remote' to some meetings. There was an unexpected moment during the Quaker Life report when Jocelyn Bell Burnell casually asked whether any representatives had difficulty reporting on Sufferings to their local communities. Suddenly the room was full of reps standing, and when called to speak they all talked about how their reports were met with disinterest and limited opportunities either to speak or be published. I felt privileged to be representing Sheffield and Balby where I am encouraged to do both, in a community that understands the historical importance, inspiration and strength that comes from strong networks both ways to and from the centre.

2. Nominations

Not unrelated to the simplicity theme, and frequently raised during the weekend, was the work of various nominating groups. We heard that the Central Nominations Committee is very challenged by volume of work at present, especially as in addition to the usual on-going central nominations they are now seeking twenty people for the Book of Discipline Revision Committee. However there was much relief and good cheer when we heard that although most of that challenge remains, the two people they have nominated for the crucial posts of co-clerks to the committee have agreed to be brought forward; and the

reason for such cheerfulness was because one is 'our own' Rosie Carnall (S&BAM). We will hold her in the Light as she fulfils this challenging role.

Another nominations matter was a very thorough report from the review group appointed by Sufferings earlier in the year, to look at the work of the Committee on Clerks (ConC). This committee is responsible for nominating names for the clerk and assistant clerk roles for Yearly Meeting, Meeting for Sufferings, Britain Yearly Meeting trustees, and Yearly Meeting treasurer. The report was positive about much good work being done, but highlighted issues around transparency, simplicity, communication, and the unequal distribution of power. It brought eight recommendations, and if you would like to see them all, they are itemised in the minute (MfS/18/11/17). In the spirit of simplifying procedures the first four were accepted, but not the second four, which involved increasing the work of Central Nominations Committee. We were not ready to change the system until we felt sure that the CNC has the capacity to carry out the work and there will be no unintended consequences. We expect to return to this matter in 2019, and to ensure that the CNC has sufficient resources to carry out its work. We laid down the review group that brought the report, thanking them for their work.

3. Sustainability

On the last morning it was decided, after an impassioned debate, to lay down the BYM Sustainability Group, because the extremely urgent issue of environmental sustainability is being integrated in all the thinking and activity of central work as integral to our spiritual and practical witness. Monitoring and reporting will be firmly embedded, in ways specified in minute MfS/18/11/18. But Lis Burch, clerk of the BYM Sustainability Group, asked whether this was the time to lay down the only group with sustainability at it's core? She said that the Society needs three key essential elements: adequately resourced structures that enable work to be carried out; a reversal of our diminishing understanding of what a Yearly Meeting concern really is, and how Friends respond to corporate leadings; and the importance of encouragement, monitoring and support from Meeting for Sufferings. Lis concluded: "You can take the Quaker out of the concern, but not the concern out of the Quaker. I have been changed by this service, and I will be watching". In a resurgence of the 'disconnect' issue we heard that Meeting for Sufferings needs to show that it wants to hear from Local Meetings and Area Meetings - the root and core of our community. There's a challenge to all of us, to help build and nurture networks between the Society's various communities. Can our witness to sustainability remain central to our personal and corporate lives?

In conclusion, a brief addition about diversity and inclusion. Meeting for Sufferings has been asked to take forward the work to examine diversity and make sure all parts of our structures and communities are inclusive. To help that work, Friends are urged to complete an online inclusion and diversity survey at

www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/quakersurvey

and to consider attending the Diversity and Inclusion national gathering 'Answering that of God in Everyone' at Woodbrooke 18-20 January 2019

<https://www.woodbrooke.org.uk/item/answering-that-of-god-in-everyone-a-diversity-and-inclusion-national-gathering/>

And finally, look out for an initial statement on gender diversity will be circulated to meetings in the near future as the start of a discussion "for the comfort and discomfort of all Friends".

Rosie Roberts

Meeting for Sufferings representative, Sheffield and Balby Area Meeting