

'NEWS FROM SUFFERINGS'

Report of a Meeting for Sufferings (MfS), held at Woodbrooke in Birmingham
from 4-6 October 2019

Items in this report are about taking forward our Canterbury Commitment to a low-carbon, sustainable community; about Woodbrooke and BYM Trustees' new and developing partnership; about assisted dying, and about speaking out and advocacy. Full papers and minutes of these and other items 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 11.10.19 and 18.10.19

In ministry we heard that "We are not at peace with our world. We move house, change jobs or give them up, adjust our lives etc. for our *precious relationships*. I hope that we can do this for our *relationship with the planet*."

1. Taking forward the Canterbury Commitment

During the week before this MfS weekend, a few of us met in Sheffield Central Meeting House to think about this matter together, so that I could more usefully represent us. (There was a Zoom connection for those wanting to join in from home - an interesting experiment that led us to wonder what other uses Zoom may have, for people wanting to be part of our meeting while distant or confined to home). Many thanks to the people who responded. Here are just a few contributions from that meeting.

"We need to appreciate our *western* responsibilities".

"We've *got* to say 'enough is enough', we *cannot* go on with growth and buying new things".

"We need sustainability as a standing agenda item on *all* our agendas, at every committee meeting".

"Are we over-heating the Meeting House?"

"Could we have a monthly column in S&BQN for sharing our sustainability tips, however small?"

"Let's stop calling it 'sustainability'. How about 'zero carbon action'?"

At Woodbrooke, MfS (which holds oversight of our YM-wide commitment to work towards becoming a low-carbon, sustainable community) was asked: "How might we be called to act next?"

We heard how Central Committees are responding to recommendations for action made in 2016. I must confess that when I heard that the response was for sustainability to be a standing item on all central committees' agendas, my heart sank - it didn't sound very radical or urgent. Now I realise how wrong I was. At this MfS we heard how effectively the committees have been working together, coming up with an amazing *network* of strategies supporting all of BYM under the climate-emergency-context headings of

1. **Eldership:** rooting the commitment in our Quaker faith
2. **Oversight:** strengthening our community
3. **Living faithfully:** changing our lifestyles
4. **Right ordering:** Quaker core activity and property

5. **Witness:** taking political action and promoting systemic change

We heard that our work is emphatically not *just* about buildings: we need to be sharing together *all* that we are doing. We need to take individual, local, national and global action; from house-hold re-cycling to transport policy; from an extra jersey to house building policy; from walking and cycling more to air pollution issues. We heard that what we do has to be *political*: that our individual and corporate action underpins wider efforts to redress social justice through systemic change. We must trust the bedrock of our ministry, trusting the spirit: *suddenly* the world can turn. And we were reminded of the tremendous opportunity afforded by the UN Climate Summit to be held in Glasgow in November 2020

The minute concludes: "We have heard the need for us to act in the world and that our own individual activities underpin this witness. We have been reminded that the spiritual focus of our concern is rooted in love".

This year's 2019 Swarthmore lecture by Eden Grace '*On earth as it is in heaven: The Kingdom of God and the Yearning of Creation*' is now available in book form from the Quaker Bookshop; and as a video at <https://www.woodbrooke.org.uk/learn/about/swarthmore-lecture/>

2. **BYM Trustees and Woodbrooke**

In the July 2019 News from Sufferings there was a section explaining the way in which BYM and Woodbrooke trustees are working together with a new vision for the future which has generated these strategic priorities.

- **Thriving Quaker communities:** supporting Quaker meetings and other groups to be diverse, to thrive and to grow.
- **A sustainable and peaceful world** working with and on behalf of Quakers.
- **Simple structures and practices** in our local and national organisation.
- And for all the work to be distinctively Quaker; integrated locally, nationally and internationally; and well-governed.

We heard about how the trustees of both organisations are working together to implement these strategic priorities: BYM by fundraising; progressing the local development workers idea; and developing a more regional approach. Michael Hutchinson, clerk of Woodbrooke trustees, told us about Woodbrooke's new learning strategy. He emphasised that Woodbrooke is a learning organisation, not a hotel. Trustees see the position (significant drop in Friends coming to Woodbrooke) as an opportunity for renewal, bringing learning to Quaker communities in nations and regions, and providing meeting-centred support. BYM trustees have also been considering simplifying central governance structures. "We need the right number of Friends taking responsibility appropriately".

3. **Assisted dying**

Sufferings had received two minutes from AMs who have adopted a concern to work for a change in the law in relation to assisted dying in the UK. The AMs, with slightly different views in relation to the details, have asked MfS to support a process of discernment more widely among Quakers in Britain. This was a very deep session, with a strong spirit of listening and and exploring, focusing on the question "What can we, as Quakers, say about this that is different from the debate in the world around us?" We heard that Friends do want to explore these issues further (both assisted dying, and death and dying more generally). Friends want to talk about these issues within their meetings, but knowing there

are differing and deeply-held views. We do not necessarily expect to come to unity. We heard that failure to unite is *not* a failure. Others may polarise - there is a value in our standing in the middle, making sure the debate is genuine, respectful and loving. There is a value and a beauty in being able to find neither for nor against. We were asked "What does love require of us?"

AMs are encouraged to explore this issue, and Sufferings hopes to return to it at a future meeting. We hope Quaker Life Central Committee will develop some simple materials to support this exploration.

4. Speaking out and advocacy

We heard from Anne van Staveren (Media Relations Officer) and Grace da Costa (Public Affairs and Advocacy Manager). There are many ways of telling the Quaker story: through national print, broadcast and social media, blogs, podcasts and our website, collaboration, engagement and publications. It is important to be clear about our audience and the key message. We heard about recent examples of their work. This is how our Yearly Meeting speaks out on matters of concern: only speaking out on what is already a clearly discerned position.

The next Meeting for Sufferings will be in London on 7th December 2019. 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.

Rosie Roberts
2019

October

Rosie Roberts (*rosemarymroberts@gmail.com*)
Craig Barnett (*craigtransition@gmail.com*)
Meeting for Sufferings rep and alternate, Sheffield and Balby Area Meeting