

## Report from workshops at November Area Meeting

Guided by the Minute 38 from BYM gathering 2017 we asked the question, “What is our ministry?” – as individual Friends, as Local Meetings and as Area Meeting. Where do our passions as a meeting lie?

There is a strength in having a local basis for Quakers as well as having a national voice: we can spread out and work with others. As one Doncaster friend said “We’ve got the problems of the world here”. Can we use Meeting to sustain each other and strengthen our responses to these problems?

We also reminded ourselves of key points in the report of our recent Area Meeting review.

- Nominations and simplifying structures – community not bureaucracy
- What is our ministry? A clearer sense of who we are, what our common concerns are
- In-reach – connected to the point above – we need to work on ourselves and our community
- Opportunities for learning and action together: sharing across our meetings
- Dealing with the practicalities – the disproportionate size of our local meetings, geographical spread, busy lives
- Diversity in meetings – addressing the opportunities through outreach

We felt that currently we are on a journey of simplification so that we can make space for our Quaker Community to grow. Community occurs by grace: we need to give it space to grow, with “just enough” organisation to keep it together. We asked if we have perhaps lost the importance of regular worship together. Are some people going to more meetings around meeting, than meeting itself? The meeting for worship feeds the community, and the community allows for solutions to problems to emerge, through waiting for the spirit.

Our ministry can be one of listening uncritically, and sharing our life experiences. Meeting is then experienced as welcoming, with a

supportive atmosphere. Permission is given to explore one's own spiritual leanings. Quakers don't seek to conform, or to be respectable. Meeting is an accepting space, although we shouldn't fall into the trap of being like a club. It should be both a comfortable space, and a challenging one.

Our ministry is also out in the world, and in laying ourselves open. There is ministry both inside and outside the meeting. Meeting should be a place to feel renewed, to re-engage with the world. We are committed to practical steps. It is just as much ministry when we, for example, cook for the homeless.

A number of friends stressed the features they wish to see in our meeting as:

- Spirit-led
- Searching and questioning
- Learning together
- Working for peace
- Letting our lives speak
- Spirituality expressed through what we DO - spirit into action
- Community
- Welcoming
- No in-group
- Openness to self and others
- Equality
- Waiting in the light
- Communicating our passions

So to sum up, we want our meetings and Area Meeting to have the right amount of structure and right ordering to support a vibrant, diverse and growing community. We must be vigilant that we fulfil our requirements as a meeting, whilst never allowing organisation to disrupt or stultify the spiritual life of the Meeting. We also want to bring new people in and welcome them, and we want to encourage diversity of all kinds. And it is also important to be clear on our shared values and identity as Quakers. We have to manage the tension that can exist between diversity and tradition.

So, there are implications for how Area Meeting might respond to these challenges over the next two to three years. Some suggestions are:

- Area Meeting Away Days
- Promoting more learning opportunities across all our meetings
- Outreach activities
- Working with Elders and Overseers across Area Meeting
- Supporting our LMs in what they do well and making space by laying things down
- Clarifying our ministry as an AM based on what our LMs are called to do.