

CIRcular



For Friends involved in local ecumenical and interfaith work

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Oxford Bridgemakers

Oxford is the first “Bridgemaker” Group in the UK. It consists of families and couples from different communities who meet each other in their own homes and share a simple snack, learn how to “affirm the other” and help to create a culture of peace at the grassroots.

Initially eight voluntary coordinators, each from a different faith community, recruit an agreed number of families or couples from their own community, let’s say five or six. The families commit themselves to inviting to their home for a simple snack a family/couple from another faith community and follow it up with a return visit during the first four-month period. They repeat the experience with a family or couple from a different faith group in the second and again in the third four-month period. Single enthusiasts pair up with a friend for personal security reasons. The coordinators meet, are “paired”, e.g. Quakers with Sikhs, then match their families/couples with families on their partner’s list. Each family/couple is issued with simple guidelines, basic principles and useful questions to help on their first visit. A second year, extending the experience of each family/couple to a further three families, will be possible.

Why now?

We live increasingly segregated lives. Rampant individualism, acquisitive commercialism, the politics of division and fear are having an isolating effect on us all. There is an urgent need:

- To develop the confidence of ordinary people so that they may enjoy our multi-cultural society.
- To promote the process of “affirming the other”, to extend the experience of living in harmony with others.

- To give people the opportunity to share what matters, to create a culture of respect and hospitality, to celebrate and learn from differences, and to help people move towards the possibility of “empowering difference”.

Future development

The first year (February 2006-May 2007) began with Oxford, the production of a DVD and the design of a website www.bridgemakers.org.uk. The second year I will be establishing groups in Reading and perhaps Swindon. Once I have developed the website and networked with Interfaith groups, local organisers throughout the UK will be able to establish their own groups. Now that excerpts of the DVD are on the net, I hope it will spread throughout the world.

If you would like to know more about being involved, have a word with Richard Thompson, 14 Devitt Close, Reading RG2 8EF

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Friends and the Ecumenical Agenda

At the beginning of August in the week before the triennial meeting of FWCC in Dublin, 12 Friends from Australia, Kenya, Norway Sweden and the UK met at Woodbrooke to discuss the topic of "Friends and the Ecumenical Agenda". The international participation gave a fascinating insight into the issues faced by Friends elsewhere.

Of course Quakerism began, as did many other Protestant denominations, in reaction to the religious practices of the day.

George Fox railed against steeplehouses, and against hireling priests who were unable to instruct the people in the genuine ways of the Spirit of God. Fox taught that the Seed of God or the Inner Light was in everyone, and each person had direct access to the Spirit, which could instruct them directly without any other human intermediary. Robert Barclay, also in the seventeenth century, wrote about the invisible church, which included all those of goodwill who listened to the inward spirit, whether or not they called themselves Christians, and the visible church, which people consciously belonged to out of choice and calling, and to witness to the life of the Spirit found in a particular community.

Today in Britain Yearly Meeting, Quakers have one national committee, QCCIR, to look at our relationships both with Christians from other churches and with people of other faiths. We recognise that the Spirit of God works in all people of goodwill, and not just in our own practice.

Both Fox and Barclay believed that Quakerism was a fresh blossoming of apostolic Christianity, in which prophecy was still alive and well, and revelation was a continuing process. Fox believed that Christ had come to those who have received the Holy Spirit; therefore the Kingdom of God was present and Friends were already living in the "end times"; this is known by theologians as "realised eschatology".

Today we have tensions within BYM concerning whether Quakers are Christians or not; often

these arise because we are "led astray" by definitions of Christianity which are limiting or arising elsewhere than in Quaker thought. Should we not see ourselves as inheritors of the prophetic apostolic tradition, witnessing to the reality of the guidance of the Spirit, in the same way as the early Church experienced Pentecost? This experience of the Spirit, then as now, is beyond human concepts and languages; each hears the message in their own language; all can witness to its reality.

Each denomination of the Christian Church has developed along a different path; can we be true to our own interpretation whilst recognising that

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others too can experience the Spirit, in their particular forms of worship? How we experience the Spirit in our various communities might be a good basis for discussion with others, in

which we can share the experience of our meeting for worship, and in particular, the experience of a gathered meeting. 1 Corinthians ch12 could be used as a basis for considering the contribution each makes to the whole body of Christ. In considering which of our practices are provisional and which are eternal, we may find ourselves moving towards a common experience of the Spirit.

Visiting Lichfield Cathedral on our afternoon out to Fenny Drayton and Lichfield, we came across this definition of a Christian. "A Christian is anyone who believes that this is God's world, who walks the way of selfless love after the pattern of Jesus Christ, and who lives in the power of the Holy Spirit, so that all may find fulfilment." Such



Friends in Woodbrooke

definitions are completely free of dogma; and yet sometimes we Quakers can give the impression that we are superior to others because we have risen beyond their dogmas and creeds unaware that our perceptions of others may be inaccurate or out of date.

Within some Quaker meetings there is considerable resistance to getting too involved with other Christians. There can be a polarisation between being involved with other churches and being involved with other faiths. In reality one does not preclude the other, though they may appear to be different and opportunities for dialogue may differ. Quakers may have a role to play in being a bridge, with our emphasis on “that of God” in everyone. In some instances other churches are ahead of us in the interfaith field.

Of course some Friends have had unfortunate ecumenical experiences, particularly at the local level, where sometimes narrow definitions and creedal statements dominate the agenda. Each local meeting has to make its own judgements on the degree of involvement which is appropriate to the circumstances. Friends who do become involved locally can sometimes tread a lonely path, if they do not feel supported in their meeting, and if they find it difficult to contribute to an agenda controlled by others.

On a more positive note, Friends can both give and receive spiritual gifts in ecumenical encounters. We can learn more about the Bible and the origins of Christianity and how others think about Jesus. Maybe as Friends we need to study the Bible ourselves more in order to enter effectively into dialogue with others. Modern Biblical scholarship has affected other Churches as well, and there are many liberals out there, although sometimes at local level more conservative approaches may be found.

We can bring to the ecumenical encounter our own perspectives on Christian unity. “The unity of Christians never did subsist but in Christian love only”. (Thomas Storey). For us unity is relational, a tool, not an end in itself. Our emphasis throughout our history on direct spiritual experience, rather than outward forms or creedal statements, testifies that it is God who unites, not words or systems. We seek unity, but not through uniformity. Each church can remain true to its own identity, but with our particular emphasis on

experience rather than belief, one of our gifts may be to seek to discover the experience which lies behind the beliefs of others. Articulating and living out this approach may be God’s purpose for the Religious Society of Friends in the ecumenical movement.

Michael Gunton

Linda Pegler

Bradford Muslim women visit Historic meeting in the Dales

On June 12th four Settle MM Friends helped welcome Bradford Muslim women to a visit to places of worship in the Dales including Airton Quaker Meeting. The visit was organised by the Yorkshire Dales Millennium Trust.

We met the group at Airton, welcomed them with tea and biscuits, and a talk in the meeting room. Some of them, especially the older women, had very little English, but they all seemed to relate to the quiet simplicity of the building, and the simple headstones in the graveyard - not dissimilar to those in their culture.

Three of us Friends walked with them through the fields to Kirkby Malham Anglican Church while conversation continued. There was a young



Walking through the fields

Opinions in articles and letters are those of the writers and do not necessarily represent those of this committee.

Any contributions from Friends are welcome.

Asian community worker, their English tutor, and a local church worker with them. Most of them had never ventured outside cities before. Holidays were with children and to the seaside.

It poured with rain, but nobody let this spoil the day, and the women proceeded, umbrellas raised over their bright new traditional clothes, singing heartily in Urdu.

Lunch was *their* treat - a sumptuous communal meal brought with them in the minibus and enjoyed by all in the church hall before going on to visit the Methodists in Malham. By this time the sun was shining, and a good day was had by all.

**Evelyn Shire
(Keighley and Craven AM- formerly Settle MM)**



Friends with their guests

Editorial

The report on the conference at Woodbrooke on "Friends and the Ecumenical Agenda" raised some challenging questions about how we as Friends participate in discussions with other churches. A group of those of us who attended hope to continue to work on these issues, and may produce something to help Friends in this area. Some Friends at local level in particular can feel quite isolated and can wonder how to communicate effectively when agendas are set by others.

There is the possibility of a workshop or meeting on this topic at the Yearly Meeting/Summer Gathering at York in 2009. Watch this space.

Meanwhile if you have any ecumenical experiences you would like to share, write them up for CIRcular. They may help others, or others may be able to help you.

The Hibbert Trust

I have been appointed to take part in a Collaborative Enquiry into the Future of Liberal Religion organised by this Unitarian Trust. This is being held over four weekends. The participants are all Unitarians except me and someone from the Sea of Faith Network. If you would like to help me think through what the Quaker input might be, please email me:

lindapegler@blueyonder.co.uk

Soil and Blood

"If your god is the god of your land, then your land becomes your god" - Third European Ecumenical Assembly reported by Richard Seebohm to QCCIR

A stirring of the blood;
Feet mired in soil.
Here, at home, we're enlarged,
Embraceable. Beyond?
A terrifying forest
Of foreign-ness, where we have
No milestones, no signposts
And nowhere to go for comfort.

**David Megginson
Notts and Derbys AM**

The very interesting report about the Third European Ecumenical Assembly is available from Richard Seebohm at:
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Produced by the Quaker Committee for Christian and Interfaith Relations, 173 Euston Road, London NW1 2BJ

Quaker Committee for Christian and Interfaith Relations keeps Quakers in Britain informed of movements towards co-operation within the Christian Church and opportunities for interfaith dialogue, and it responds on their behalf to other churches and communities of faith.

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