

Quakers and Race

New Year Edition 2005

Editor's Notes: The world-wide focus on the Asian earthquake tragedy has brought all races together in our horror and concern for those affected. Much that is in this edition of *Quakers and Race* may seem peripheral as our attention remains on that huge event.

Before it happened, I had made a note to remark here how much I welcomed the Queen's Christmas broadcast with its focus on equality. I also note the wonderful signs of human sympathy as money is generously collected for the Tsunami sufferers as another message of equality.

It all shows what it is that we are striving for when we take our testimony to equality with real seriousness.

May I thank all our contributors to this issue which brings you news of last year's experiences as well as future plans and hopes. Our best wishes to you all. Happy New Year.

Robin Bennett, Editor, (Hereford&Mid Wales MM)

Jottings

Ü *Equality Commission*

Friends have been divided about the Government's new Equality Commission. The 2004 Queen's

speech says:

'My Government will continue to provide protection from discrimination and exploitation. Legislation will be introduced to combat discrimination in the provision of goods and services on the grounds of religion, as well as race, sex and disability. A single Commission for Equality and Human Rights will be established. My Government will maintain its commitment to social justice and legislate to increase the rights of disabled people'.

While many welcome this government commitment to Equality, most in the racial justice world fear that attention will focus elsewhere with the abolition of the Commission for Racial Equality. They fear that the current less than subtle rise in racial discrimination across Britain will become hidden behind other more popular equalities. Only time will tell.

Ü *Re-launch*

The Churches' Commission for Racial Justice has re-launched the Ecumenical Racial Justice Fund (ERJF) as 'Racial Justice'. For more than thirty years the Fund has supported vital anti-racism and diversity education through small grants for local initiatives. Changes in policy at Christian Aid mean that it will not be able to maintain the same level of support so the Fund is now seeking new partnerships, not only to meet the shortfall, but to

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The views expressed in this newsletter are not necessarily those of the Committee for Racial Equality.

expand the Fund and its work. Friends may like to consider asking their meetings to take up a Special Collection on Racial Justice Sunday 11th September – details on CCRJ website. CCRJ is the Commission of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (CTBI), was responsible for *Asylum Voices* documenting the experiences of asylum seekers, published in 2003.

➔ *Northern Towns*

There are many activities taking place in Bradford, Oldham and Burnley and across those towns affected by riots in 2001 and the BNP's continuing election activity. Typical is the following:

the representative body for the voluntary and community sector and faith sector of Oldham is part of Voluntary Action Oldham and we also hold responsibility for developing Oldham's Community Network. Voluntary Action Oldham is looking for proposals to undertake a study to map community activity in the neighbourhoods of Oldham and identify two areas for use in a pilot study of neighbourhood community empowerment. We invite expressions of interest from qualified organisations with experience in the voluntary and community sectors. Supported by the government's Neighbourhood Renewal Fund and Oldham Borough Council.

Contact David Hillary at Voluntary Action Oldham, 37 Greaves St, Oldham OL1 1TJ O161 633 3584 ceto.coodinator@vaoldham.org.uk

Committee Conference with Leicester Friends, November 2004

I'm writing this on Remembrance Sunday. If only every Sunday, every day, we could remind ourselves that men should not go to war. When will we learn that we really are citizens of only one world, all children of only one God. Yesterday we were reminded that racism is still a powerful destructive force, and in our Quaker Meetings too. For all our testimonies to equality, we are tribal, we think of ourselves as living in a small part of the world, we think that our way is the way, we 'know' what is right, what is normal. When will we change the story.

Living in Britain, being normal is English, middle

class, white, Christian (even if we are Quaker), family oriented, loyal to the village or town where we have lived since we were born, in a secure job, home owning, well behaved. Just who is that 'normal' person. To how many people do all its attributes apply. And yet we believe it to such an extent that anyone who doesn't fit is assumed to be an outsider. To be black in a Quaker meeting means holding back, pretending, unable to share with full honesty the range of experiences, being alone to deal with the hurt.

These are uncomfortable thoughts. Shall we turn away yet again. Or shall we proclaim a new vision, "One day I will unite the world".

There is a lot of work to be done. To right economic injustice and to level the playing fields. To challenge the newspaper versions of asylum and refuge. To build trust and understanding with people whose faith appears different to our own. To discern when it is right to be proud of our Quaker tradition and when we need to be humble to listen and to learn from others. And, if our testimony to equality is truly important, to ensure that challenging racism is key to the whole issue of seeing each other as children of the one God.

Finally, how will you bring this to the attention of your Friends?

Anthony Gimpel (Leicester MM)



Introduction Notes used by Robin Bennett at the Conference

1 **Personal** involved with Friends on race issues for about 14 years. Sharp contrast in 1980s between Friends commitment and Inner London Education Authority commitment. Some recent movement and some disappointment remains.

2 There is a fantasy of "**normal**" in Europe and UK meaning Christian, polite, in a career, educated, white. In truth that's a minority view, yet politics and media plays to that fantasy; so people suffer daily rejection for deviation from that 'norm'.

3 **Quakers** have not adopted race as a core issue (unlike peace, environment) so we revert to class attitudes when it arises as in 2 above. Thus discrimination and victimisation continue; we remain unaware, unconvinced and fail to acknowledge

difference or welcome diversity.

4 **Testimony** to Equality could take Friends in the vanguard of action both inside the Quaker movement and from that movement to the world at large, challenging the 'norm'. In fact we have still to learn what it's all about, despite 30 years of Quaker committees.

5 **We need to confront three issues:**

- **Our country** engages with real people, communities celebrate Divali, End of Ramadan and pray for Palestine/Israel but yet many white people have a deep suspicion of the 'abnormal', so black people experience discrimination, Commission for Racial Equality will be submerged in a new General Commission, job seekers still find rejection, communities are still segregated.
- **Britain's attitude to** refugees is now too often to vilify them with a contemporary rejection of 'welcome to the stranger' with the press debasing the concepts of refuge and asylum in a world of political statistics and xenophobia.
- **Our Meetings** regard this concern mostly as only a "special interest group" outside the normal; it is a black person's concern (no-one round here). This is a denial of our testimony.

Nonetheless, after the review of the Committee for Racial Equality's work, Quaker Life Central Committee have make a bold and very welcome decision that a new CRE should be embedded as a permanent Functional Committee of Quaker Life.



Message from Lichfield Friends

Thanks for such a full, and quick, report on Leicester. We were sorry to be prevented from joining you. I see a number of names from the 1980's in your listing - and we will all of us recognise what you are saying. A bit depressing, in one sense; on the other hand, these questions are ongoing (if changing, a bit) issues in society as a whole, so we must expect to go on addressing them. The shameful hysteria over asylum is new since 1980, and this is where as many of us need to be counted as can make ourselves heard. And our stand for an inclusive society must explicitly take race as a

factor. Keep it up. In peace.

Anthony Wilson, (Staffordshire MM)

Ratcliff & Barking Monthly Meeting Elders

Held Thursday 7th October 2004 at Romford Friends Meeting House

Minute 04/33

The Quaker Committee for Racial Equality Leaflet '*Against racism, where do Quakers stand*':* We feel that the leaflet can be used for small groups or for personal reflection, particularly to support those dealing with racism at work or in their own lives. We believe that adults often sow the seeds of racism as children of all races can play happily together.

We can envisage the reflections in the leaflet being used like our *Advices & Queries* and encourage Elders to try this, if it is felt to be appropriate, in their own meetings.

*Free copies of the leaflet are available from Quaker Life Racial Equality Section, Friends House, 173 Euston Road, London NW1 2BJ Tel: 020 7663 1017 or email: carmelk@quaker.org.uk

Some Members of Committee for Racial Equality at Woodbrooke November 2004



Robin Bennett, Rosemary Dinnage, Audrey West, Barbara Ryder, Lyn Beazley, and Jo Rado (Photo Colin Billett, Quaker Life Cen Com Link)

Quaker Life Central Committee has decided to renew this committee as a permanent committee of

the Society and new nominations are being brought forward to start work in early 2005. The four year life of the 'old' committee ended with a final residential at Woodbrooke, and here are 2 of the final Minutes:

'Eudora Pascall, Media Relations Officer for the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) was present for our afternoon session and now led our evening session. We asked 'what is our message', 'who is the message for' and 'how can we convey the message'.... We thank Eudora for this session and for her guidance about ways in which we can communicate our message effectively, including how to use and address the media. Essentially our reflections arising from this session convey our conviction, at this last meeting of the 'old' committee, that we remain disappointed that Friends generally have not made significant advances in their commitment to the principles of equality in the way we act in our meetings, the way we appoint staff, the way we seek nominations and the way we allocate our budgets. These sessions have helped us to articulate our anger at slow progress but also enabled us to see that the best way forward is to be positive and to undertake assertive action across the various levels, local and organisational, of our Yearly Meeting. The work of our Society and the processes by which it is taken forward are all areas where racial equality needs to become real.' (Minute 04/42)

'At this conclusion of the 2000-2004 Committee for Racial Equality, we wish to acknowledge the contribution made by all 14 Friends who for shorter or longer periods have been members of this committee. We recall times of sharing our stories and the variety of our experiences. Some of these showed how painful it can be to consider experiences of identity; others were moments when we found a simple unity about actions we needed to take, such as requesting employment statistics in Friends House, proposing changes to the 'yellow form' that guides our nominations processes and our work to produce the Leaflet for all meetings.

We are glad that the concern for racial equality is now to be the focus of a new functional committee within Quaker Life. We hope the concern will always receive proper attention not only in Quaker Life but from all other committees and departments and also that there will always be practical and applied outcomes from the reflections that arise in the new committee.

We have a feeling of hope. At all levels of our Religious Society we have encouraged an awakening of the value of diversity. We have felt a sense of privilege at being involved in this committee where through our friendships with one another we have deepened our experience in the things which are eternal.

The meeting on 12 February will be an Interim Committee and the First Meeting of the newly appoint Committee for Racial Equality will take place at Friends House on 30 April 2005.

We send this minute and Minute 04/42 above to Central Committee and through them to other Central Committees and also to all those who have served this committee during its 4 year life.' (Minute 04/44)

Visit to Atlanta

Last year I was fortunate to be able to attend the annual Gathering of the Fellowship of Friends of African Descent,(FFAD) along with my daughter Yola. This was held in the United States, at Morehouse College in Atlanta.

The programme was centred on 'Nourishing the Spirit Within Us.' One theme that echoed throughout the various workshops was the need to confront the past that has left deeply embedded racist beliefs and practices in our societies. These still cause pain, confusion and unnecessary barriers to progress for too many communities around the world. Racism affects both black and white, wherever you are on the spectrum.

In a debate about reparations, I suggested that apology was an important part of the process towards healing and reparation. Another participant later came to me to say how necessary mourning was as a way to show our deep pain. She felt, with the evidence of grieving, the damage could not be so easily brushed aside. I was particularly gratified to receive this insight from a white Friend. We all met at a very deep level at that Gathering.

This year, we were invited back to the second Gathering in Atlanta. Again we were blessed with the generosity, hospitality and love of our Friends. Yola and I walked into our first workshop on the Friday morning following arrival. We were greeted

by hugs, laughter and dancing. The workshop, led by Niyonu Spann, was called 'Stepping More Fully Into Our Power.' Through rhythm, movement, reminiscence and visioning, participants were directed to recapture the power that we knew had always existed deep within us since childhood. This realisation assisted me with my own workshop, later in the day.

I was asked to present a Community Workshop on 'Forgiveness and Reconciliation,' which I delivered after much reflection, preparation and anxiety. Through a talk and some shared experiences, we addressed the following aspects: mourning; apology; trauma and suppressed memories; slavery and traumatic amnesia; telling the story; forgiveness; reparations; Quakers, reparations and reconciliations. People found the opportunity to share their histories a very moving experience. Some said that they recognised it as an important process on the path towards true freedom from the bonds of an oppressive past.

The workshop appeared to slot well into the overall theme this year:

'I am, because we are.' The workshop facilitators had not discussed their presentations together beforehand, yet the topics dovetailed with remarkable synchronicity that can only be described as spirit led. I know our Clerk Deborah Saunders put in a lot of prayer and direct communication to help bring the programme together.

The following day, I joined a group to further our plans for the 2005 vision that we had begun in 2003, led by Ruby Byre. A concurrent workshop explored the meaning and practice of 'Ubuntu' – A person is a person through other people.

That Saturday evening, during a business session, the whole group heard and felt the deep concern of our Friend from Kenya. She talked through her tears of work she and a group of mothers were doing to assist children who had been orphaned by AIDS to remain in their family homes, and avoid further fracture through orphanage or deaths of siblings. We pledged to raise funds and to explore strategies to develop this programme.

The Gathering of FFAD in Atlanta this year saw the continuation of leadings towards healing and reparation for ourselves and our neighbours, both near and far. Next year, we expect to hold the Gathering at a Quaker conference centre in St

Helena, an island off the US Carolinas.

Exceptionally, the community of African slaves on this island were not prevented from continuing their culture, and were aware of their origins. After emancipation, Quakers established a well-respected education institution on the island, predominantly for the education of freed slaves. Tourists are attracted to the island culture, as well as its Quaker heritage. This Gathering, planned for the spring of 2005, is already forming around the theme of rebirth and renewal.

You are welcome to attend if you are a friend of Friends of African Descent. Contact Audrey West: audrey.west@btinternet.com for further information.

Audrey West, (Hampstead MM)

Hope in Our City of a Thousand Peoples

Two weeks ago I visited Birmingham Central Mosque for Friday prayers. This was not the result of a sudden religious conversion - I suspect I would even walk past a burning bush without hearing anything - but at the invitation of a group which meets there. On reflection, it seemed very odd that I had been inside mosques in Turkey and Bosnia as a tourist, but never entered one in my home town.

What struck me more than anything was the sheer enormity of what happens on Belgrave Middleway every Friday. I sat at the back, trying to adopt a position that did not reveal the soles of my feet or dislocate my hip, and in came the world.

There were men from Iraq and Iran, from Pakistan and Bangladesh, from Somalia and Kenya, from Palestine and Turkey, from Kosovo and Croatia. By 1.15 there were more than 1,500 filling the large hall.

The Central Mosque, I gather, is the Islamic equivalent of ecumenical. It is neither Shiite nor Sunni; nor does it have affiliations to a particular national group. As such it receives and welcomes all, including, somewhat unexpectedly on that day, a party of teacher trainees from Wales, all female. They were doing a whistle-stop tour of Birmingham religions.

More than anything, the visit made me realise that I

should have made one earlier, and allowed the hospitality and evident sense of companionship to provide a counterbalance to the tales of Islamist extremes so often drawn to our attention.

No doubt the Central Mosque has its wilder elements - the ones who stole the condolence book for the Bigley family, for example - but overwhelmingly that is not the impression it gives. One group - the people who invited me - has already been making efforts to shake hands rather than swords. The Birmingham Muslim-Quaker Peace and Social Justice Group have been meeting for a couple of years to explore common aims and beliefs at a time when we could all do with something in common.

The group was first set up by Chris Martin and Javed Hussain. One might imagine that Quakers and Muslims have little in common, and their approaches to subjects such as the nature of the divine or the after-life would indeed be radically different. Instead, the group has sought to seek out what they have in common.

At the heart of it lies a concern for social justice in a world that seems to offer little, the struggle for peace and the plight of the poor. Charity and relief work have always been high on the agenda for Muslims and Quakers. Their argument is that if common cause cannot be found in Birmingham, where communities live together more peaceably than just about anywhere, then we're unlikely to find it at all. There are historical links too, of course. The Quakers were one of the first groups of immigrants who found Birmingham to be a tolerant and congenial place to settle, just as the Muslims from Africa and Eastern Europe have been among the most recent.

The reality of rainbow Birmingham was only too apparent as the Central Mosque filled. What was once a city of a thousand trades is now a city of a thousand peoples.

I really don't know whether meetings between a handful of Friends and Muslims amounts to a hill of beans in this crazy world. But to see a little understanding, and a willingness to talk about what we have in common, rather than what divides us, was more encouraging than anything I saw on the news that day.

[This article was provided by Dr Chris Upton,

Senior Lecturer in History at Newman College of Higher Education in Birmingham.]

About Racial Justice

Until the new Committee for Racial Justice makes other arrangements, *Quakers and Race* will continue with myself as editor – contributions warmly welcome to robin.bennett@freeuk.com. Similarly, I shall continue to send out the e-mail *Network for Racial Justice* – new correspondents very welcome.

Churches and Race is a professional and readable magazine and you can obtain it from CCRJ at Bastille Court 2 Paris Garden ,London SE1 8ND Direct line: 020 7654 7240 richard.solly@ctbi.org.uk

Robin Bennett, Editor.

If you would like to receive *Quakers and Race* on a regular basis, please email: carmelk@quaker.org.uk phone: 020 7663 1017 or contact: Outreach and Racial Equality, Friends House, 173-177 Euston Road, London, NW1 2BJ



Quakers and Race is always looking for book reviews, reports on local work, Quaker involvement, and concerns that you may wish to solve/share
Please send to:

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