



Quaker Peace  
& Social Witness

# Journal letter from London

**Abigail Darton, November 2017, No. 1**

## **LEAP CONFRONTING CONFLICT**

Dear Friends

I would like to begin by expressing my huge gratitude to QPSW and the wider Quaker network for giving me this opportunity to work as a peace worker. I have always been passionate about working towards a more peaceful world, and only two months into my placement I am already involved in a range of exciting peace building projects. This wouldn't be possible without the support and guidance of Quakers in Britain.

This year, I am working with Leap Confronting Conflict, a youth charity that specialises in conflict management and delivers training to young people and the professionals who work with them, to support non-violent, transformative responses to conflict. They have a long track record of working with young people in gangs and in prisons and have more recently started working specifically with young women and young people in care as well. The relationship between Leap and Quakers is longstanding. Alec Davison, a Quaker, founded it in 1987 as a project run by The Leaveners. Although it has since

grown and developed into an independent charity, Quaker values are still clearly present throughout the running of the organisation and the work carried out with young people. Indeed, the CEO Thomas Lawson is a Quaker himself and was one of the first cohort of peaceworkers in 1992, working at the National Peace Council. It's great to see where I and other peace-workers could be in a few years' time! At the moment however, I sit within Program Innovation at Leap, a small but exciting team responsible for developing new projects and curriculums.

One of my main tasks is supporting the management of the Peaceful Prisons Project, a piece of action research that is piloting a new model to reduce violence in prisons. We are aiming to achieve this through the training of prisoners and staff in conflict awareness and mediation skills and the development of community circles, which empower prisoners to address and manage conflicts in their wings. A part of my role on this project has been looking into how these community circles might develop and I have particularly enjoyed learning more about restorative approaches and therapeutic communities to inform this.

Abigail Darton is working for Leap Confronting Conflict as a UK peaceworker.

As someone who has always had an interest in the criminal justice system and fair treatment of prisoners, being involved in this project has been a real eye opener for me, both in terms of the realities of life in prison and the frustrations and excitements that come with working in partnership with them. At the start of my placement I expected this to be my only involvement in prison work but one month in I was extremely excited to be tasked with managing another violence reduction project in a different, this time women's, prison. Although working towards the same aims as the Peaceful Prison Project, this project has a very different plan, with more of a focus on working with women as they enter the prison as well as training prisoners and staff to deliver training together in order to model positive relationships. I am looking forward to seeing how the two projects develop and what effect these different approaches can have on prisons.

In contrast to these, my other key project involves conducting research into a possible new strand of work for young people, titled Identity, Belonging and Extreme Thinking. Sadly, we are all too aware of the rise in extreme thinking within our society, and the dangerous consequences that divisive narratives can bring. Young people can be particularly vulnerable to being drawn into this thinking, but at the root of this often lie conflicts surrounding identity and belonging. Therefore, Leap are looking to develop a new program for young people which enables them to address these conflicts and explore issues relating to extreme thinking within safe spaces. I have really enjoyed having the time to delve into this and think about what might be an appropriate response to such an important topic without demonising or further excluding any young

people. Much of the research has involved reading about the concepts of identity and belonging from a range of perspectives and learning about the different governmental and third sector responses to extreme thinking that already exist. One thing I found particularly fruitful however, both in terms of this research and my own development as a peaceworker, was attending the Conflict Matters conference at Friends House in November. It was really inspiring to hear from educators, academics, policy makers, youth workers and many more about how conflict can be a powerful tool for transformation in education and how difficult conversations can be held with young people.

As well as engaging with such interesting work, I am also really enjoying being a part of the team at Leap. Not only do they provide support and humour throughout the working day, I find it inspiring to be surrounded by people working so hard to provide opportunities for young people and promoting peaceful responses to conflict - a great way for me too to develop my own understanding of peace and what it means to be a peace worker! I am really excited about what the rest of the year has to bring and look forward to updating you on my projects in my next journal letter.

In peace,  
Abigail