

Being a Quaker chaplain

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In April 2017, Friends gathered at Woodbrooke for the Quaker Life Representative Council to explore the theme "Helping Seekers Find Quakers – Being Worth The Finding!" We know our Quaker message is still startling and powerful, that experientially we can know God directly in our lives. How can we, as Friends, become a more visible presence where we live, learn and work? Joannie Harrison's talk on her work as a Quaker chaplain is shared here.

Alistair and Kevin have said that I'm the 'walk it as we talk it' slot. And I'm sure that as Quakers we all do walk the talk, or at least I hope we do. We may do it in different ways, and I'm here to share how I do it in a hospital setting. To give you some background: I have been a Quaker for over thirty years now, not always a comfortable journey - my faith challenges me - and I think it should. And I've been a hospital chaplain at Peterborough City Hospital for just over five years.

Peterborough is a growing city with a diversity of faith communities. There is an obvious Christian background with a beautiful cathedral and churches of every denomination you can think of. There is also a large, established Muslim population, and thriving Sikh and Hindu communities. And in more recent times, many Eastern European people have settled in Peterborough. So the make-up of the people working in the hospital, and the people accessing the services offered there, reflect this diversity.

It's an exciting place to be in and to work in. And, of course, it has its challenges.

Peterborough City Hospital was one of the hospitals financed by the PFI [private finance initiative]. It's a big hospital: 680 beds and over 3000 staff. It's big, but not big enough. Much of the time we are on 'black

alert', which means we are full to capacity, waiting for beds to become free before new patients can be admitted. On the first of this month we amalgamated with Hinchingsbrooke Hospital to become the North West Anglia NHS Foundation Trust, which in the long term will hopefully alleviate some of the pressures, and save money of course. But at the present time the pressures of the change itself have created more issues for some staff to cope with. Staff are already working under pressure: they are multi-disciplinary teams, trying to meet set targets under the scrutiny of managers, the public and the less than sympathetic media.

As chaplain, I am employed to give pastoral, spiritual and religious support to anyone and everyone who enters the hospital, those of all faiths and those of none. Those terms – pastoral, spiritual and religious – can flow into each other, overlap and blend. And sometimes they substitute... I can perform a religious act for pastoral reasons. An example is baptising babies who haven't lived, or giving Holy Communion, both religious acts which I perform for pastoral reasons. Thankfully I don't have to do it on my own: I work as part of a team that includes a Methodist (our lead chaplain), two Anglicans, a Catholic and a Muslim. And me, of course, a Quaker. We all work part-time, but between us we give twenty-four-hours-a-day cover for 365 days of the year. We are also supported by some amazing volunteers.

The fact that there's a Quaker on that list is incredibly important to me. I truly believe that I, and Quakers in general, have something to offer to chaplaincy. I make the scope of chaplaincy broader, more inclusive.

Prior to working at Peterborough City Hospital, I had worked one day a week as a volunteer chaplain at a nearby mental health hospital, and the other chaplains there encouraged me to apply for my present position. It's a paid role: I went through a formal application and interview process, alongside Anglican and Methodist applicants. On the day, I was the only applicant not wearing a clerical collar, so the Trust wasn't specifically looking to appoint a Quaker – but that is what they did. I was the first non-ordained chaplain to be appointed by the Trust. The fact that I went through a formal interview process gives me confidence; it affirms and validates my presence in the team. And for me, it was the final part of a long discernment process.

I turned up for my interview knowing all the boxes I could tick, all the

skills and experience I had to offer, and my rehearsed mental script and answers at the ready. I was also aware that the other candidates would have things to offer that I couldn't. But in the few moments before I went in for the interview I centred down and connected to that place of stillness and I felt an overwhelming sense that *all would be well*. The bigger picture was safely in God's hands. With that I relaxed, I abandoned my rehearsed interview, and I talked openly and confidently about my beliefs, my values, my spirituality and my groundedness in Quakerism, and how these lend themselves to chaplaincy.

I left the hospital confident that I had done some good outreach, but I didn't think that I'd done enough to get the job. I thought that they would play it safe and appoint someone from a more mainstream church. But they appointed me, a Quaker, knowing exactly what they were getting. That's very affirming.

Of course, the interview was a trial run for what was to come. Because in Quaker chaplaincy there are no rehearsed answers: it is not a painting by numbers ministry. It is about being grounded in, and trusting in, the Spirit. It's about accessing the bigger picture in whatever way we can with whatever is at hand. It's also about being vulnerable, going into situations where you haven't got a ready answer, and being able to leave a situation with the feeling that you haven't been enough, sometimes.

But I am excited by the challenges I meet in the hospital, and the opportunities I am offered daily to grow in my Quakerism and the Spirit. Hospitals are *thin* places. The situations that I am called to are *thin* places. (In the Celtic tradition a *thin* place is a place where the barrier between those things which are seen, earthly things, and those which are unseen, heavenly, is so thin that God's presence can be felt.)

So what do I do? How do I do it? How do I walk the talk?

I searched for a quote that would give a feel, or an overall sense, of what I do, and I settled on these two. The first is from George Fox:

Be patterns, be examples in all countries, places, islands, nations
wherever you come; that your carriage and life may preach
among all sorts of people, and to them; then you will come to walk
cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in everyone;
whereby in them you may be a blessing, and make the witness of
God in them to bless you.

I've deliberately included the entire quote, which I'll come back to later.

The second quote is from *Advices and Queries* 28: "Attend to what love requires of you, which may not be great busyness." Attend to what love requires of you...

And those quotes underpin all that I do in the hospital. There isn't a moment when I am in the hospital when I am not aware that I am representing Quakerism. I quickly lost count of the number of times people said to me, "I've never met a Quaker before," and some will never meet another.

Whether I am talking to patients, their families and loved ones, nursing and medical staff, managers, ambulance crew, office staff, cleaners, police officers in A&E, Care Quality Commission officers during inspections, I am a Quaker. It's not a role that I slip into when it suits me. It's not just a label I wear; it's who I am. I am grounded in my Quaker beliefs, and my belief that Quakerism lends itself to chaplaincy. Outreach just happens, it is an integral part of my chaplaincy role. I don't have to plan for it, it just happens.

My ministry is a ministry of not having answers. It's one of deep listening and spiritual discernment, being open to the promptings of love and truth, trusting that I will be guided and prompted. It's also a ministry of authenticity, of being real, of recognising what's there exactly as it is and not looking away or deflecting from it, but opening it up to greater possibilities. It is so tempting to tell people what they want to hear, to take their pain away, to make them feel better immediately. But Quaker chaplaincy is not about trying to put a spiritual sticking plaster over a gaping wound. It's a ministry of vulnerability, of waiting to be led, and sometimes it's a ministry of being broken and tender. It's a ministry that demands that you are grounded in your Quakerism, not precious about it.

As a hospital chaplain I am often called in times of crisis, when thresholds are encountered and sometimes crossed. Times of rites of passage. I said earlier that hospitals are thin places, and I try to open situations up to the bigger picture, which for me includes the recognition of the Mystery and the presence of the Holy. *Quaker faith & practice* says nothing about the spirituality of chaplaincy. It describes roles that people can hold, and how chaplains are appointed, but says nothing about what for me is the main role of a hospital chaplain, which is to connect with

others in order to give spiritual support in times of crisis.

Much of my work is in A&E, critical care, times when people have been given bad news, end of life scenarios and, sadly, in Maternity when babies have died. Times of emotional turmoil, times when the big questions come to the fore, the questions people have never had to ask before. The word chaplain means 'to share the cloak'. For me that's a powerful image. You can't share a cloak from a distance, you have to get close and connect. It implies an intimacy, a spiritual intimacy. Meeting in those things which are eternal.

As a Quaker I go into these situations with a mental blank sheet, feeling my way forward using a mixture of intuition, and deep listening, listening for the unsaid things. I want them to feel that they are in a safe place where they can acknowledge and absorb the reality of what has happened, and recognise their feelings and express them in whatever way they choose. I want them to know that they have been heard. I know that being heard is often the first step to healing, but healing can only take place if we start from a place of trust, not fear. Sometimes I am given words, but we all know that communication is so much more than words. Very often I come away from these situations and I can't remember what I've said... a bit like offering vocal ministry in Meeting for Worship. And silence is a powerful prayer and I'm holding these people in prayer throughout, in some form or other. When someone is facing death or the brutal reality of life, they speak their truth; there is no act put on, no protective persona put forward, no mask, no facade. Their usual social props and defenses are temporarily discarded. And it's important that I let go of what I think I know, leave my ego behind and discard my protective masks. I show myself to be vulnerable. It's not about me; it's about connecting with them and then opening the situations up to include the bigger picture, the holy, the mystery, God, whatever word we choose to use, and seeing where that takes us. It's about holding them in that place of precious habitation, as John Woolman describes prayer: "I saw this habitation to be safe, to be inwardly quiet when there was great stirrings and commotions in the world." That's it, that's the cloak that I'm trying to share. And I know that that is what is possible for every encounter.

As Quakers we are good at these times; we don't have an official party line or creeds to define our words or actions. But we can take heed to the

promptings of love and truth and be guided by them, discerning the way forward to make space for God's healing presence. It doesn't have to be named or introduced, just felt and recognised. It's times like these that connections take place. It's times like these that we meet in those things which are eternal. And it's at times like these that shifts can take place and healing can begin.

It's also at times like these that I grow in the Spirit. Going back to the George Fox quote, 'whereby in them you may be a blessing, and make the witness of God in them to bless you': what drains me in my chaplaincy is what feeds me.

Going into the unknown, sometimes to the edge, and sometimes into the abyss with nothing to hold on to except your faith that somewhere, somehow, God is in this, is a challenging yet affirming experience. A former colleague (who wasn't Quaker, but was a deeply spiritual man) told me, 'Your work will become your worship.' And that is true for me.

My colleagues are also called to these situations, and they will have their own way of meeting each one. We sometimes share these experiences and differences of approach in group supervision sessions. It's probably at these times that the differences between our faith perspectives are most obvious, and when my outreach to the team is most vocal. We speak openly and all try to hear and learn from each other, but there are times when discussions become uncomfortable and things go quiet. When I was in the mental health team I was told by the lead chaplain that I was the 'chaplain to the chaplains', and I think I continue the role here. Perhaps it's a natural role for a Quaker, the peacemaker. But being the only Quaker in the team can be a lonely role.

I have found that gentle humour can be a very useful outreach tool when you know your audience. My Catholic colleague will sometimes tease me about being a Quaglican, because I am sometimes called to baptise babies close to death, or to give Communion, and I always answer that if that is so I must also be a Muslim, and a Sikh and an atheist because I have done funeral services for them all. And of course I often remind him of that good Quaker, Mother Teresa, who always maintained that God spoke to us in the silence of the heart.

On another occasion my Methodist colleague brought in an article from a Methodist magazine entitled 'Quakers are an enabling people'

written by an eminent Friend. It was a well-written article, describing all sorts of good works carried out by Quakers, but not once did it mention God, nor did it mention the Spirit. So I probably went overboard explaining to my colleagues that we are not simply an enabling people, we are a spirit-led people with a prophetic voice. Quakerism is not simply about being good and nice! My colleagues tease me now whenever a patient tells them that they have been visited by a lady chaplain who was not a priest, but was very nice!

When I first started at the hospital the norm was for people to expect an ordained priest to be the chaplain, and people were surprised when I turned up (staff included), but more and more we are being called to give chaplaincy support without religious bias. Staff are more confident in asking specifically for a non-religious visit, to give pastoral and spiritual care for their patients. Quakers are in an ideal position to do this. As Quaker chaplains our colleagues need to have confidence in us, to trust us to do a good job, to be a valid and valued member of the team. We may not have the certainty of creeds to offer, but I truly believe that there is a place for a ministry of openness and vulnerability that enables people to find their own answers or understanding of that part of their journey that they are experiencing at that time. I believe Quakers do have that added value to give to any chaplaincy team.

There are days when I leave the hospital and I don't know what I believe any more... my faith is sorely tested, and I am quite wrung out and exhausted. Empty.

And there are other days when I leave knowing that I have seen prayer made visible. I have experienced shifts taking place and the beginning of healing. I have sensed God's presence and know that I am not on my own, that the Holy is always present waiting to be realised.

I have spoken about the importance of being authentic, owning your own truth and finding your own words to express it, but I'm going to end with a quote, someone else's words. I'm in safe hands; it's from Rufus Jones.

Many times I have found my way home in the dark because my feet felt the road when my eyes could not see it. There is something in us deeper than hands and feet, that finds the way to the central Reality, and when we arrive we know it.

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