

# CIRcular

For Friends involved in inter-church and interfaith work



Special edition for Meeting for Sufferings

December 2019



## Walking together with difficulty

Quakers' relationship with Churches Together in England

The warm relationship between Britain Yearly Meeting and Churches Together in England is under strain. The Quaker Committee for Christian & Interfaith Relations (QCCIR) has prepared this special *CIRcular* to give background and help Friends engage with the issues. We ask for your discretion and prayerful upholding as we engage on your behalf with the wider Christian family in England.

### [The Quaker peace church in a divided world](#)

What are our gifts as Quakers in the polarised and confrontational world we inhabit? Given our radical views and progressive history, how do we sit alongside those with whom we disagree? What strengths can we draw on when we have to say we do not agree on an issue such as same-sex marriage? The conversations we have with churches across England, Scotland and Wales can be seen as mirror images of the conversations we have with

other forms of Quakerism within the world family of Friends. Around the world, not all Quakers accept equal marriage, and for many it is a source of considerable internal tension and religious mistrust.

We should never question the integrity or values of other churches when we are at the ecumenical table. To sit with other churches is to be with those who are different but to have a common bond. We can have creative and constructive conversations. It can be painful and profoundly challenging. It can also be an opportunity for deep insight. Everyone can gain.

Not being in unity with other churches or faiths on an issue is not a failure, and this 'messiness' is a characteristic of ecumenical life. We need to be brave and also humble when we see differences and continue in fellowship without feeling victorious or defeated when compromises are necessary.

Words of explanation and guidance can be found in *Quaker faith & practice* 9.01, and Friends are encouraged to read that chapter.

## The presenting issue

Quakers in Britain agreed to join the interchurch structures across these islands in 1989, when the then British Council of Churches was laid down. Since that time, through QCCIR, we have maintained those ecumenical relationships along with Ireland Yearly Meeting. The four “ecumenical instruments” – namely Churches Together in England (CTE), Action by Churches Together in Scotland, Cytûn in Wales, and the Irish Council of Churches – have different internal structures and all relate to Churches Together in Britain & Ireland.

CTE has a six-President structure. We are part of the Fourth Presidency Group along with the Lutheran Council of Great Britain, Evangelical Lutheran Church of England, German-Speaking Lutheran, Reformed and United Congregations in Great Britain, and the Church of Scotland (Presbytery of England). The position of President – a four-year term – rotates among the membership of the group. Quaker Rowena Loverance served as a previous President, and in 2018 it became the turn of a Friend to be appointed. A nominations sub-group was created, which nominated Hannah Brock Womack. The appointee was agreed by the other members of the Fourth Presidency Group. However, the Churches in CTE have rejected the appointee because she is in a same-sex marriage. Same-sex marriage is not accepted by most church members of CTE, although other CTE Member Churches do, including the United Reformed Church. The Methodist Church is in internal discussion about its position.

The CTE Enabling Group, representing all 49 Member Churches, considered the situation and in September 2019 came to “a clear mind, by a substantial majority”. This is what it has asked of us:

“For the sake of our ecumenical unity at present, we request that the Fourth Presidency Group show restraint by not exercising the office of their Presidential appointment. We suggest that this be represented by an empty Presidential chair for the current term of office. We acknowledge the pain and sadness that this

will provoke and recognise the vacant chair as a continuing reminder of our divergence on this issue. We as an Enabling Group commit ourselves to the continuing journey of consultation, study and deep listening to God and to one another in all areas of our pilgrimage together.”

Many individual church members have expressed their concern about the situation, and all are working out carefully how an “empty chair” for the Fourth President can be used as an opportunity for discussion and learning. Over the years, space has been found to accommodate the diverse religious teachings of churches, and we seek now to find space for diverging views on human sexuality.

## QCCIR’s discernment

In October QCCIR minuted: “We have identified that the announcement will raise both issues and emotions. There will be anger, pain and frustration that a Quaker has been prevented from exercising an important ecumenical role because of the attitudes of other churches to human sexuality. However, it is crucial that as Quakers we do not reflect the attitudes of the world in our responses – a world that is polarised, and in which issues are seen as being binary. Complex and difficult issues require continuing engagement with differences that we may find frustrating.”

QCCIR is committed to supporting and promoting diversity work among churches and faiths that brings in new gifts and perspectives – of women, of ethnic minorities, of young people – so that ecumenical bodies reflect the reality of diversity in churches in England. We acknowledge as Friends that we make most progress by working with those who disagree with us, as that is where change takes place. We are not being asked to change our discerned position on equal marriage, and we cannot ask other churches to change their views. What we are seeking are ways to bear witness to our truth in peace, love and respect.

*Mark Lilley, Clerk, QCCIR*  
*Marigold Bentley, Secretary, QCCIR*

The Quaker Committee for Christian & Interfaith Relations (QCCIR; *Quaker faith & practice* 9.13) keeps Quakers informed of movements towards cooperation within the Christian Church and opportunities for interfaith dialogue, and it responds on their behalf to other Churches and faith communities.

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