

# QUAKER LIFE REPRESENTATIVE COUNCIL 13th to 15<sup>th</sup> October, 2017

Woodbrooke

## Reflections on the Weekend from the Clerks

Once again Friends, we find ourselves at the closing moments of Quaker Life Representative Council. It seems a short time since our last gathering in April.

We have been sensitive this weekend to what we believe is the clear link between our earlier gathering at which we tested our joyfulness and confidence in being Quaker and doing Quaker, and our striving this time to discern, to a degree, whether we believe the current structures of our Society are robust and fit for purpose for the future that we hope our Society will obtain. And how we practice our faith as Quakers is supporting our yearning for the experimental and adventurous experience of the spiritual and religious life.

More than 90 Friends have come together as Quaker Life Representative Council at Woodbrooke. We have welcomed 9 Friends who have experienced Representative Council for the first time. With great cupidity, we have been blessed once again by the mildest of weather, an autumn sunshine, and, once again we have been able to sit out on the verandah, this time marvelling at the changing colours of gold and red of the garden trees set against a blue sky and the most perfect white clouds.. Weather at Woodbrooke is important. We leave, I sense, with memories of fair weather, companionship and, we hope, some good fun too.

But let us remember what we have heard and shared and experienced this weekend.

Alistair Fuller, challenging his Quaker Life colleagues with near - interviewish sorts of questions about their work and their current focus. And then throwing the googly question, such as what book would you take to a desert island, recite a poem by heart, what superpower would you wish to have? Each googly was batted back with impressive vigour and with unexpected and memorable answers. Well done Team Quaker Life!

We reflected on our main theme. As Clerk, I offered an introduction to our main session by remembering the Manchester Conference held in 1895 when a thousand Friends gathered to discern how the Society might save itself from a slow descent into real obscurity, if not eventual oblivion. It was the younger Friends in 1895 who spoke with eloquence and force and envisioned a future for the Society which has sustained it for more than a hundred years.

We recalled the experience of RECAST and wondered if it should be looked at again, with fresh eyes, to see if further implementation might produce rewards. The introduction asked all the questions which we have seen and heard rehearsed in other fora, committees, local and area meetings and in our Quaker journals. We must continue to seek the answers.

Afterwards, I was alerted to a centenary celebration of the Manchester Conference held in 1995 which offered a number of significant contributions from well-known Quakers. Their papers are recorded in the Friends Quarterly and I will add the citation to our list of Resources.

In our main session we heard from three Friends, **Paul Parker**, **Deborah Rowlands** and **Julia Ryberg**

**Deborah Rowlands**, currently Clerk to Britain Yearly Meeting and **Paul Parker**, Recording Clerk combined their powerful and eloquent resources, reporting on their recent journey through North America and the ideas that they have brought back. We were challenged with three opening queries: what gives life, why do we meet and what is Gospel Order? According to Sandra Cronk,

Gospel order rests on three pillars. Deborah and Paul used the visual metaphor of the three-legged stool.

**The first pillar is our inward life of worship and discernment.** In North America with over 40 yearly meetings, it can be hard to find common ground between them, but in any faith community, there must be outward teaching and inward reflection. Do we do enough studying ourselves? In North America yearly meetings, they make regular use of clearness and care committees. How can we make better use of our Quaker practices? Could we try extended worship, communal singing, more worship sharing or programmed worship?

**The second pillar is the functioning of the church community.** We should function in a way that reflects our needs, rather than doing things in the way we have always done them. Philadelphia Yearly Meeting laid down many of its committees and formed collaboratives of those with particular interests. How do we grow leadership? Are young people able to exercise leadership locally? We should be asking how young people can be enabled. Collectively agreeing minutes is an important part of our discipline. People need to learn it. Minutes give authority and support to work. How often are we in touch with those who don't come to meeting for worship? Can we use our meeting houses to build community? Can we consider using paid support to free up people for other tasks? How good are we at naming our gifts? Nominations must enable us to grow in service. Deadness happens when Friends wish they were somewhere else.

**The third pillar is social testimony.** What are meetings doing together? In Baltimore Yearly Meeting area there is a Quaker voluntary service project to enable young people to put belief into action with support. We also heard about an example of training groups of 20 young people a year in political lobbying on Quaker concerns. Doing work together is what draws us together. It's about finding our meeting's ministry.

They concluded by once again challenging us. Is there a particular pillar or leg of the stool that your meeting needs to pay attention to? Three legs give stability. We need to encourage experimentation. It's about removing or replacing things, not adding extra burdens for ourselves.

Our speaker, **Julia Ryberg** provided a charming, lively and fascinating glimpse of her role as an enabler and supporter of Quaker communities around Europe and the Middle East on behalf of Friends World Committee for Consultation. Julia has to deal with language and cultural differences as well as expectations from people who have discovered Quakerism by accident or design. We heard of Poland and the apparent absence of a vocabulary to express Quaker ways. The three Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania which are all quite different in history, religious experience and secularisation. We heard of Sweden, where she lives, which has seen an unexpected upsurge in interest and indeed membership of Quakers. Julia startled us by telling us of her own surprise at having to deal with the presence of legacy of war in young Friends across so many countries in Europe and the Middle East. The Barcelona group are saying they need to find a Quaker voice for what is happening there. We must hear more from Julia – somehow, somewhere!

We thank our five **Conversationalists** who shared their Quaker stories – we believe in a more relaxed format with light-touch facilitation and open-doors. We hope you were able to move around the conversations as we planned.

We thank **Alison Mitchell**, Devon Area Meeting, hearing how Exeter Meeting held an all-day Meeting for Worship. **Richard Bush**, Bournemouth and Coastal Area Meeting spoke of creating a new Meeting in Wimborne, Dorset. We thank **Simon Best**, Woodbrooke's Head of Learning who helped us explore how new expressions of Quaker Community are possible. We thank **Helen Drewery**, Quaker Life's Head of Witness and Worship who explored how Meetings could be simplified to free up time for things of the spirit. We thank **Chris Venables**, Engaging Young

Adults Project Officer, in conversation with Friends on the importance of building intergenerational community in Britain Yearly Meeting and how we might encourage and support young adults to become involved in the life of our local and area meetings and on central Quaker bodies. I hear he sings very well round bonfires too.

As Clerks and as Planning Group we are indebted to our Home Group facilitators, elders and mentors. I keep saying it Friends, and it is from the heart, that without you Council gatherings such as this would be really quite hard. Please, Friends, continue to over service in this way. It is much valued.

Once again Saturday night has been Movie Night- a choice of two prize-winning, box-office hits, wonderful, dramatic, funny, and challenging, French films have been enjoyed by their audiences. We have missed our Assistant Clerk - Sarah Fox, who has been prevented from coming to Woodbrooke this time. We wish Sarah good health, rest and recovery. But we did have a bonfire with singing led by our young Friend, Chris Venables, and supported by other experienced or novice campfire minstrels and songbirds.

Once again, throughout our weekend we have been supported to an inestimable degree by staff and colleagues from Friends House and the ever-gentle and kind ministrations of Woodbrooke's hospitality team and Friends in Residence. Good food in abundance – but perhaps too much fish! And its fish for lunch today!!

As ever, your Clerks and Planning Group are indebted to all of you, dear Friends, for coming from near and far to join with other seekers. To share your lives as Quakers. As ever we hope you can return to your Meetings with a good report of Quaker Life Representative Council and with a confidence that our Council is well regarded by central committees including Trustees and Sufferings and our contributions to the life of our Society is taken into account. We have a voice, Friends, because we live as Quakers at home, at work and in our local and area meetings. We speak from experience.

I'd like to offer a heartfelt thank-you to my good Friend, Kathy Chandler, who has been Assistant Clerk this time. Kathy is very cool, very organised and keeps wonderful notes of our sessions. All the things I am not and do not. I do, however, thoroughly enjoy being your Clerk. It is a privilege and it is fun.

There has been an animated buzz of conversations around Woodbrooke which we take to mean that you too have found your weekend inspiring, confidence building, fun and very much worth the travel. As a planning group we have a sense that we have been together as Friends and that you have experienced a memorable Council this time. We hope you can take back to your local and area meetings something of the optimism that our three speakers and our Conversationalists have inspired in us. We hope you will experiment with how you worship, how you do business, how you live together as loving communities.

Do experiment Friends. Live adventurously. Therein lies joy.

**Michael Long, Clerk**

**Quaker Life Representative Council**

*“Behold, I will do a new thing,  
Now it shall spring forth;  
Shall you not know it?  
I will even make a road in the wilderness  
And rivers in the desert.”  
Isaiah 43.19 (KJV)*