

Quaker Life Representative Council

12th to 14th October 2018 at Woodbrooke

“All Are Welcome: transforming our Quaker communities with younger Friends”

Reflections on the Weekend from the Clerks

This is the Clerks' opportunity to offer a few brief reflections on our corporate experience over this eventful and innovative Representative Council weekend. A weekend when we thought deeply about how we as individuals and as Meetings can be more welcoming and receptive to young Quakers. More sympathetic to the different worlds that they inhabit – different from our own and our experiences as being over 50, 60, 70, 80 - dare I say 90 years. Our young Friends live amongst a youth culture which operates online through an evolving variety of media and platforms and within which it can be difficult sustaining a Quaker witness. We have responsibility to find ways and means to inspire and encourage them to continue their spiritual journeys and have confidence that what they do can make a difference and can bring about change.

I'd like to offer this from Quaker Faith & Practice 10.10, a Friend Peggy McGeoghegan writing in 1976.

If we take seriously the nurture of our children in the worshipping group, we must start by re-appraising the whole life of the group. What kind of communication exists between us all? Do we know one another as people sharing joys and sorrows?

Do we have enough confidence in each other to know that our problems as well as our convictions and uncertainties can be shared with understanding? How is the child and the stranger received amongst us? Do we see our young people as individuals we want to know and care for and do we want to provide opportunities when they can get to know and care for us? Are they encouraged to feel that they have much to give us, that we value them and are the poorer without the insights and questioning they provide? Are we across all the ages a community learning together? Do we consciously look for experiences which can be shared by the whole community? Children and young people need their own peer groups but are encouragingly appreciative of the whole group sharing when they feel an integral part of it and can share in situations which deepen relationships and form lasting friendships. Part of that sharing is learning to know of our past as Quakers and of our Christian roots but even more necessary is the sharing of what we as Quakers believe today and how this should be shaping our lives both individually and corporately. Together we have a task in exploring our faith today with all its implications for action.

A Friend, writing in 1976!

This October Representative Council

Sarah Fox's excellent briefing notes for Home Group Elders Facilitators and Mentors enables our whole weekend to mine a rich seam of experience, expertise of personal stories and Meetings' stories. We have repeated our April Council innovation in making space for worship and reflection, in plenary and in Home Groups.

Our plenary worship sessions and our Council overall has been supported by our weekend Elder, **Iain Law** from Quaker Life Central Committee. Time in our Home Groups has been an integral part of the offer at this Council. Relying on your Facilitator, Elder and Mentor to ensure that you are in a zone of comfort in exploring your experience the potential for change in your Meetings.

We are indebted to colleagues from Quaker Life staff from Friends House. In particular Howard Nurden who has led his team from Children & Young Persons with his inevitable sensitivity and perceptiveness and crafted a window into the experiences of the lives of young Quakers which has been rich, illuminating and fun.

Allow me to say a thank you to our Saturday morning speaker, Helen Chambers, who took us through a very useful and accessible resource – “All Are Welcome: Growing An All Age Community” – prepared for our Meetings and showing how we might engage with young and younger Friends. Its three call-outs

- “Reach Out” to families
- “Connect” with each other
- “Enrich” Our all-age worshipping community.

Allow me to say a thank you to our workshop providers – Alistair Fuller, Helen Chambers, Sophie Smith, Mary Penny, and Naomi Major. The workshops *see attached list* are tasters for full day workshops which the Children & Young People staff can offer to Meetings. And of course Marleen Schepers and Andrew McVicar our unfailingly helpful colleagues from Quaker Life.

But at the heart of our experience this weekend has been our encounter with young Friends ... and indeed our very delightful and even younger Friends!

Our young Friends Shivani Daxini, Daisy Everett, Emma Chandler, Juliette Chandler have very courageously come to our Council to share their stories of life within Quaker meetings, of being young Quakers and being with other young Quakers. They were introduced and questioned by our Friend Mel Cooke - Mel set the tone for a session I will remember for a very long time

I was tempted to run into detail about our young Friends responses but then remembered that they have been filmed and we can all return to and enjoy their session and indeed share it with our own Meetings. Their words are much more eloquent than anything I might try do to justice too. Remember Friends, these were young people from 14 to 24.

Instead, I'll tell you of my own astonishment and marvelling at their confidence, their clarity of expression, their perceptiveness, their lively description of their experiences with Friends young and old, their very good humour, their real seriousness about being Quaker, doing Quaker living in the spirit and bearing witness to being a Quaker amongst their friends, classmates or fellow students. What a team Friends, what a team!

I shall take back to my Area Meeting a determination to reach out and forge stronger and better links to the four Universities in our Area Meeting. And indeed to schools, which my own local meeting did last year.

The Epilogues offered by Juliette, Emma and Shivani were a particular pleasure. I will take back “*Thanksgiving*” to my Area Meeting. The expressions of thanksgiving from you Friends was diverse, from a thank you for clean, crisp white linen, thanks to rail station staff and passengers for being thoughtful and helpful for your journey, to heartfelt thanks to Friends old and, new present today or back home, and for hugs – which mean a lot to all of us.

We can't forget our even younger Friends – Solomon, Abraham and Miles. I shared a Home Group with Sol and Abe and they were a delight – full of big smiles, a bit shy and lovely company.

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

I'd like to offer a more personal reflection on the weekend. And my Friend and assistant Clerk Sarah Fox will also offer her personal reflections.

When the eminent American journalist and newsreader Dan Rather retired - perhaps 10 years ago – he offered a professional valediction to camera. He said one word “Courage”. It has haunted me ever since.

I experienced an early discovery of self and a sense of living in the spirit – at school in the early 1960s. I made an early and accidental discovery of the Society of Friends – its astonishing history, its experience over centuries, its wisdom and its speaking truth to power. I revelled in four wonderful years at Stoke on Trent Meeting – led by Victor Burch, father to our Friend Lis Burch. I became a member in 1971. Then in 1975 I was diverted into university studies, a new career choice, job hunting. Career development. A dimming of the light. A suppression of the fire. And then a sense of losing courage to try to make a change in the world though Quaker witness.

Young Friends today – and we have seen it in our young Friends over this weekend - are much more adventurous, much brighter, more able to challenge than I ever was. More willing to get together with other young Friends. To share their lives in ways we probably don't quite know of, nor might possibly understand. And young Friends today have courage.

We need courage today. We need strength of character and solidarity with others. We need people like these young Quakers, Quakers who have the courage to challenge authority, to speak truth to power. To say yes to positive change for our communities. To living in the spirit as well as living in the world. This weekend has reassured me that we do have young Quakers amongst us, in our Meetings who do have courage. What might they achieve? What difference might they make? We as Meetings must invest in and support this courage that they have and keep it burning.

I'd like to close my reflections by going back to Quaker Faith and Practice 19.35 and record the children of Bristol Meeting in 1682.

“On the 7th of the month called July, they dispersed the meeting which then consisted chiefly of children; for the men and women being generally in prison, the children kept up their meetings regularly, and with a remarkable gravity and composure: it was surprising to see the manly courage and constancy with which some of the boys behaved on this occasion, keeping close to meetings in the absence of their parents, and undergoing on that account many abuses with patience... On the 30th, in the afternoon, about fifty-five were at the meeting, when Helliard, with a twisted whalebone-stock, beat many of them unmercifully, striking them violent blows on their heads, necks and faces, few of them escaping without some marks of his fury...

He also [on 13 August] sent eleven boys and four girls to Bridewell, till a Friend engaged for their appearance next day before the deputy mayor, who endeavoured both by persuasions and threats to make them promise to come at no more meetings; but the children in that respect were unmoveable: wherefore they were sent to Bridewell again, Helliard, to terrify them, charging the keeper to provide a new cat of nintails against next morning. Next day at the Tolzey [mayoral court] he urged the justices to have them corrected, but could not

prevail. The boys and girls were mostly from ten to twelve years of age. Their names were Samuel Gibbon, William Miller, Joseph James, Elias Osborne, Tabitha Jones, Jonathan Jones, William Fry, Joseph Watkins, Rachel Mears, William Day, Samuel Watkins, James Randy, Martha Watkins, Martha James and James Wheeler.”

Michael Long, Clerk

Four young people, who were not their mothers' daughters but Quakers, being wise and teaching me to see through their eyes.

Challenging myself to, again, return to my meeting and to try to change the assumption that parents will run children's meeting. When my daughter was small without the gentle expectation that I would not look after my daughter and thus the gift of an oasis of peace for one hour a week I don't know what would have happened.

The delightful burble of babies and the memories of little boys charging around Meeting and also at another Meeting the audible tut tutting of some members when my daughter would not sit still.

The wisdom of Solomon from a man who happened to be young. His quiet actions unrecognised by almost all.

How do I greet people? How was school? What do you do? How was work? Tender listening for all I don't know well enough to actually know their story, or you haven't seen people for a while and their story has changed, in big meetings where you don't and can't possibly keep up enough.

Meeting in a swimming pool is not for me but our mid-week Meeting retires to a pub. It has got it right and I should not be reluctant to tell you. We know each other, warts and all, and younger friends and older friends have a community. Early 20s to 70s retire for an hour or so and create a proper Quaker community of support and love for a funny shaped group of people.

Finally, personal support for me in a time of challenge, encouraging me to hold the bonfire. It was a perfect night. Balmy and the fire lit well. We, young and old, gave our prayers to the fire, sang and laughed.

Sarah Fox, Assistant Clerk