

Report of Meeting for Sufferings held at Friends House on 3rd June 2017.

After a period of worship and the normal preliminaries Meeting for Sufferings started its work by hearing the annual report from Quaker Committee for Christian and Interfaith Relations. One new aspect of their work is the project “The Changing Face of Faith in Britain”. This aims to look at the challenges and opportunities for Quakers in Britain today that arise from the growth of the secular society with value systems that do not have a religious base. Some legacy funding is being used to support a three month Research Fellowship based at Woodbrooke to look at these issues. One aspect of this is the number of people who put down their religious affiliation as “none” – there may well be ways that we can connect with at least some of these people. This stimulated some interesting ministry. Elaine Green, from Ipswich and Diss AM, reminded us that a great deal of research has already been done in this field which should be consulted prior to starting anything new. Current academic wisdom suggests that we are in a post secular age; people are recognising the spiritual aspects of life but finding new ways of expressing them apart from religion. Cornwall AM had joined with other religious groups to hear an excellent talk on Faith in Britain Today given by Professor Linda Woodhead from Lancaster University. Perhaps something our Extension Committee might like to consider?

We heard that Banbury Meeting had been working to reach out to people who did not belong to any religious group by inviting people to various events, but they found that the most effective was a day of all sorts of activities – they found that spiritual inspiration comes from doing things together. Newcastle Meeting has a weekly time when the meeting house is just open for anyone to come in and sit in quietness – they call it a Space to Share. Lastly from this report there was ministry from Swarthmoor AM talking about the value of working with Churches Together in Cumbria. When the other members of the group were worrying about falling orders for warships to be built at Barrow, Quakers were able to pose questions about the morality of spending money on arms. Also Quakers had managed to persuade the group that burying nuclear waste in Cumbria was not a good option when they had initially been in favour.

Whereas QCCIR report to MfS once a year, the BYM trustees report to each meeting. This time trustees focused on their Annual Report and Accounts for 2016. Much thought and effort has gone into making this more digestible for the membership and has resulted in the production of a very nice condensed colour version focussing on our work called “Our Faith in Action”. I commend this to Friends – it will help you to see what is being done centrally. Finance is relegated to one very clear double page spread at the end. It shows that only just over £2m of the total income of just over £9m comes from Friends contributions and it has remained stuck at that level for several years. Trustees want BYM to be able to continue with the work they are doing, but costs are increasing and they are very anxious to continue to pay staff fair wages. For this reason the trustees would like to see the level of contributions rise to £3m, so this year are asking for an average contribution of £225 per person.

Away from internal affairs, the trustees also said that they were working with the companies in which we invest on the matter of tax justice.

Now, more briefly:

Leeds AM had found that “Our Faith in the Future” formed a very useful basis of structured decision making and discernment when they had been faced with the question of whether to sell their Meeting House in the centre of Leeds to a property developer in exchange for a fairly substantial bag of gold.

Young Friends General Meeting reported that their membership was growing. They urged AM's to publicise their existence and activities to younger Friends and to send more representatives to Young Friends General Meeting. An important issue for them was the mental well-being of younger people.

Central Nominations Committee, which 12 months ago was both slimmed down and asked to change the way it works, reported on its progress. The clerk said that the changes were not yet fully implemented. However the increased contact between committee members and potential nominees had been beneficial and the streamlining of the processes by dint of the search groups taking more of the load and doing a lot of the discernment had improved its efficiency and effectiveness. The result of the reduced size of the committee combined with the increase in work caused by these changes meant that the load on each committee member had significantly increased. The clerk said that it had reached the point where some had asked for early release as they could no longer manage and that she was often worried by the amount that she was asking of committee members. She went on to make an impassioned plea to AMs and LMs to support any of their members who were part of CNC and pleaded that they should not be asked to do other Quaker work as well.

Finally, just in case it grows into something big, there is currently a rather bad tempered exchange, in a restrained Quakerly sort of way, going on between Kingston and Wandsworth AM and MfS. The former claim that MfS is not fulfilling its role, specifically in not “setting, reviewing and reporting on overall priorities” for centrally managed work.

David Beale

14th June 2017