

Northern Friends Peace Board Report to Cumberland Area Meeting November 2017

This is report of the Meeting of the Northern Friends Peace Board in Darlington on 14 October.

- ✚ The main theme which I am choosing to focus on is once again the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, (or the Nuclear Weapon Ban Treaty, as it is also known). I make no apology for this because I see it as vitally important – and also because of the widespread ignorance of its existence.

This treaty, which is the first legally binding international agreement to prohibit nuclear weapons, with the goal of leading towards their total elimination, was endorsed in July of this year, as indeed I reported to you in September. A very encouraging new development has been the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to the International Campaign Against Nuclear Weapons (ICAN), the organisation which led the moves to have this treaty drafted and agreed.

Janet Fenton, as I reported at the last Area Meeting, was at the UN when the treaty was endorsed and she attended the NFPB meeting in October. She emphasised that there is something to celebrate and that change is happening. The opposition of those countries which have nuclear weapons was not surprising, but the seriousness with which they take the Treaty is perhaps indicated by the fact that pressure in the form of cheque-book diplomacy was used by the US and UK to persuade countries to vote against the treaty.

It is too easy to assume that nothing will change, but Janet was optimistic. There are endeavours underway. For example, a Middle East project has been revived and ICAN in Israel is working with a number of different parties thinking about what a WMD free Middle East would look like. The Treaty obliges countries which are signatories to educate children on the dangers of nuclear weapons. There is also the possibility of nuclear weapon nations being asked to pledge that they would not use them against countries which are signatories of the treaty. The Treaty should ensure that the nuclear nations take some steps to make good their professed commitment to multi-lateral disarmament.

Janet told us that a big international demonstration is being organised, to be held at Faslane with peace activists from the nuclear nations as speakers. One reason for Scotland being chosen was that there is a possibility of the UK having to give up nuclear weapons if Faslane was closed. She urged us to go back to our Meetings to work collaboratively with other organisations, to urge people to come to the Faslane event. Janet has offered to speak at Meetings.

Asked about how the Treaty could get attention in the English press, Janet suggested that the Nobel Peace Prize, which will be presented on 10th December, can be used as a focus for an event and then the treaty can be on the agenda for the widest possible publicity.

- ✚ The other speakers at this Meeting were Peter and Carol Greenwood who talked about the origins and purpose of the White Rose Group which they have set up in Darlington to address issues of hatred and division in society, taking as an inspiration the words of murdered MP Jo Cox: "We have more in common than that which divides..." They said that the seeds of the group came from a shouting match with

the English Defence League. After that experience Carol wanted to understand the beliefs of those who supported the ideas of the EDL with such fervour. After the murder of Jo Cox, Peter and Carol were determined to find actions which could shift the fear and hatred also present during the Brexit campaign. They draw attention to the safe spaces which exist in Darlington and indicate where help can be found.

We participated in workshop exercises that encouraged us to think about how we respond to conflict and division, to dealing with disagreements and what steps can be taken to engage productively with others.

We shared news of peace-related activities in the Areas we represent – I am always much cheered by the number of activities which take place all over the North.

We received a report from the Trustees, who meet as the NFPB Executive. Contributions from Area Meetings and Local Meetings are covering expenses so the suggested contribution will remain £8.50 per head.

Jo Alberti, 8th November 2017