

Britain Yearly Meeting Senior Conference 2017

To all Friends everywhere,

'Quakers are too nice', a sentiment shared by two of our speakers throughout the week. As a group we can often be afraid to cause conflict. And yet, not all conflict is bad. It is important to raise problems within our own community and reflect inwardly on how we can improve. It is in this vein that in this event, and consequently this epistle, we attempted to look at both Quakerism's flaws and strengths in regards to the theme 'Diversity and Unity'.

From the 19th to 26th August 2017, 83 Friends aged 15-18 and 13 adult volunteers over 22 came together at Sibford School, Oxfordshire, to explore this theme. To introduce the theme, the committee organised a chatroom style session, with discussion groups centred on questions such as 'How do we define Quakerism?' and 'Should Quakers unite behind Corbyn?' Thoughts raised included the lack of diversity in race, class and age within Quakerism, the different interpretations of Quakerism as a religion, ideology and community and the importance of acting upon regional and societal issues. This would be explored in greater depth later in the week by our three speakers, Sam Walton, a Quaker activist, Gretchen Castle, the General Secretary at FWCC and Tony Clapp, Elder at Nottingham Meeting.

Sam's session began with an interactive activity from 'Train for Change' to illustrate the existence of mainstream and marginal groups within society. This highlighted the mainstays that are prevalent not only in general society, but within British Quakerism itself, such as that of the white, middle-class, able-bodied, straight, cis person; he himself acknowledging his adherence to these categories. In a poignant reflection, Sam noted the irony that *he* was giving a talk on diversity. Although compared to other religions Quakerism has been at the forefront of issues such as LGBT rights, there is still much work to be done in this area. Senior Conference also recognised that we, as young Quakers, are a minority, and are perhaps are not always catered for in the same way within our faith. Particularly for 18-year old participants there was a feeling of a cliff edge post-conference, with few events to bridge the gap between child and adult Quakers.

Whilst Quakerism has always been welcoming of other faiths, Tony Clapp talked about feeling like a minority as a Russian Orthodox Quaker, commenting that he was considered a radical at church and rather conservative at meeting. Gretchen Castle also discussed the human tendency to create distance and 'otherness', failing to recognise the core beliefs that bind us, or *that of God in everyone*.

At the beginning of Tony's talk he played a piece of liturgy from St John Chrysostom, and also brought in a variety of iconography. These sensory aids enhanced our understanding of the contrast between the rich opulence of Orthodox cathedrals and the pared back simplicity found in Quaker silence. In spite of this, when asked, he stated that the spiritual experience, for him, was similar. He also mentioned other faiths that shared Quaker values, such as the Mennonites, a fellow Peace Church. In doing this he highlighted the importance of respect for other ways of worship and the power of interfaith discussion. For Tony, the Orthodox Church offered a more Christocentric form of worship not seen in British Quakerism.

Gretchen Castle talked to us about a more Christocentric form of Quaker worship and the diversity of Quakers worldwide, leading a programmed meeting so we could experience it ourselves. The readings touched upon diversity in the sense that we are all unique and all have our part to play, no matter how small. Sam referred to this as the different callings within Quakerism. In his opinion, we must recognise injustice and inequality and be '****ing angry about it', each taking different steps to 'make the world more awesome', be it attending

a protest, working as a nurse or making art. Our unity is shown in our support for each other's actions. Gretchen summarised this, leaving us with the message to 'love extravagantly' as it is love that pushes us to act.

Sam used the quote 'Thou shalt decide for yourself' to illustrate how the Quakers' lack of creed allows people to come to their own beliefs and therefore believe more strongly. Gretchen demonstrated a programmed meeting format that some found unfamiliar, challenged by the hierarchical aspect of having a pastor which took away the freedom they felt in open worship. However, the silent portion of Gretchen's programmed meeting meant we could reflect on what we just heard, and unlike in other faiths, offer our own ministry. This allowed us to decide for ourselves what resonated with us and what we disagreed with, with ministry that both praised and contradicted elements of the service. The closing prayer encapsulated the thoughts offered through both prepared ministry from Gretchen and the ministry given by participants. Whilst many young Quakers were aware of the differences in the ways Friends worship around the world, they were struck by the commonalities that Gretchen focused on and the feeling of shared values. We left the talk with a renewed sense of unity, both as conferees and as Quakers.

Entertainment was provided in the form of many traditional Senior Conference games, some of the highlights being the Base Group Challenge, Human Cluedo and the Disco. This injected a sense of fun into the week that for many conferees is what keeps them coming back. The immense talent of participants was displayed in the Open Mic and Ents, where many felt confident enough to perform for the first time, or perform original material. The 22+ session 'Lifelines' had three adult volunteers share the highs and lows of their lives, again laying themselves bare to the audience. These sessions, sharing both laughter and vulnerability, are what build the sense of community felt at Conference and are an integral part of the experience.

Through our prologues and epilogues we both adhered to tradition and pushed the limits of Quaker worship. The simplistic worship organised by our Elders created a contrast to Gretchen's programmed meeting, while epilogues allowed for experimentation with seating, light and sound. At our regular morning prologue, on the centre table the Elders welcomed traditional Quaker faith books and the Bible, alongside holy books from other faiths, in a celebration of diversity of belief and demonstrating the unity we wish to see between religions. Ministry touched on the importance of young Quaker events like Senior Conference, commenting that despite their fleeting nature, they help us build the foundations needed to be a better person when in the 'real world'. The strength of our community at Conference was also evident, particularly in the solidarity shown on GCSE results day, with many seeing Conference as a safe and warm environment at a nervous and uncertain time. Our community was also tested as we tried to support vulnerable members through struggles in their lives, such as mental health, but we came through it with unity.

Overall, the consensus seemed to be that Quakers, despite our huge diversity worldwide, in beliefs, political views and backgrounds, are united in our goals. Sessions focused on the importance of bridging gaps between mainstreams and margins within Quakerism, increasing diversity on a national scale. Particularly relating to conferees, we feel there is a need to bridge the gap between young and old Quakers, engaging young Quakers within local meetings and providing more events for young Quakers, like this one (as we enjoyed it so much).

Signed in and on behalf of Senior Conference,

Clare BL and Nadia Serenity S