

Epistle QCEA 5-6th October

To all Friends everywhere,

“We are the suit-wearing Quakers who represent a radical activist movement speaking to other suit wearers”. This description (by our Director) of the work, sums up the compromises and challenges of the peacebuilding and human rights programmes undertaken by staff and volunteers at Quaker Council for European Affairs (QCEA).

We gathered as the General Assembly of QCEA at Quaker House Brussels from 5th to 6th October 2018. Around the table were representatives from 13 Quaker organisations, who embody the breadth of Quakerism across Europe. As always, throughout the meeting we were reminded of the strength and depth of the work being done by QCEA on behalf of Quakers, and all of us on the General Assembly thank the staff and volunteers for their work and the impact that work is having.

The work of QCEA is distinctively Quaker in nature and gains support from a diverse range of Quaker groups and Yearly Meetings across Europe.

Activities such as quiet diplomacy bring people together for off the record meetings, usually over a meal. This can involve working with unusual actors in a way that expresses our core values and allows people who would not usually speak to each other to do so in a safe, honest space. We have heard of good feedback on the Building Peace Together resource, which is now available in French, Russian, and Arabic, in addition to English. The challenge now is to help this resource to find its home in different contexts, for example, to universities with an international relations focus. Personal contact is vital in getting the message, as well as the resource itself, to be taken up.

In the work the team often need to need to explain what Quaker values and testimonies are. This is not just work for staff, but for Quakers across Europe, allowing Quaker groups to do the radical work in European institutions. Every Quaker in Europe has that responsibility; to talk about the work, values and testimonies of Quakers and to relate Quaker testimonies to a specific political and social context. We gain nothing by hiding our light from the world.

We value peace in our own communities, but aware how fragile peace is, especially in a European context, with the rise of populism and the increased far-right presence, with widespread speech that dehumanises, incites hatred, and calls for violence, negotiations over the EU budget which might mean less funding for peacebuilding, and of course the exit of the UK from the European Union.

We have been reminded of the power of prayer in centring our work, and that working toward peace is an incremental process of approximation.

As we approach the fortieth anniversary of the establishment of QCEA in 2019, we have reflected on the long-term nature of its work. Quaker work often achieves its impact by working consistently on the same issues over a long period of time. QCEA is no different: we were reminded that current work on anti-migrant political discourse builds on work going back to 1986. The effects of QCEA’s work may not be seen for generations, and is often not easy to neatly parcel up.

The nature of this kind of work presents funding challenges. Increasingly, grant funding from institutions focuses on short term impact. At present QCEA’s long term funding is not secure. We have discerned a bold and ambitious programme of work that involves spending down our current reserves. At present levels of funding, we have 18 months to secure funds to make the current programme of work sustainable. We see securing this funding as a minimum, and would like to see an increase in staffing to optimal levels.

We look to individual Quakers and yearly meetings across Europe to provide and increase the sustained funding which will enable this long-term focus. Plans are underway for events and fundraising efforts to celebrate QCEA’s 40th Anniversary.

Although many of us are sad, heartbroken, or despondent about the possible departure of the UK from the European Union, we continue to think that the emotional, financial and spiritual support for Quaker work at the European level is vital to faith in action. QCEA takes the shared concern and discernment of European Friends to construct a programme of work that advances Quaker values towards a more peaceful and just world. Although it is tempting to think of the political sphere as a collection of large-scale institutions — such as the European Parliament — in reality political institutions rely on small-scale, human-to-human, face-to-face interactions. It is at that level that QCEA aims to have impact.

We are reminded of the words of Rufus Jones writing to Violet Holdsworth in the lead up to the second world war: “I pin my hopes to quiet processes and small circles, in which vital and transforming events take place.” (Quaker Faith and Practice of Britain Yearly Meeting 24.56).

In and on behalf of QCEA General Assembly

Oliver Robertson, Clerk