

Epistle from the Kindler's Conference

Held at Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre, Birmingham, England
11th - 13th October 2013

This weekend, 91 Friends have met at Woodbrooke and sought ways to kindle afresh the Kingdom of Heaven within our Meetings. Does this language resonate for you Friends? Can we at last move beyond the words and really listen to each other's spiritual yearning?

We have been asked to consider individually and as Meetings: "What is our ministry"? What is the role and calling of each of us in the task of renewing our community, as each generation must? Being and doing Quaker means more to each of us than turning up on Sunday mornings.

Quaker Meetings need to be life-enhancing, world –changing places of shared transformation. "It's not called Meeting for Thinking, is it?!" We sense a yearning to discover how best to share that amongst ourselves and publicly. Our Quaker worship and insights should not be secrets to be kept by "us", a group currently limited both in number and demographic. What makes you come alive? Can Quaker Meetings be places where people of all ages come alive as a full expression of the Spirit at work in our lives, bearing fruits of love, gratitude, forgiveness, hope and joy?

Is your Meeting one in which young people (often seen as those under 60!) are seen as our now, or our future? Young people and young adult Friends may have different ways of being Quaker and of expressing their Quakerism, which may not be through attending a local Quaker Meeting on a Sunday morning. These alternatives are not less valuable.

How do we nurture the spiritual life of our Meetings? How do we respond to the sparks of new ideas and kindling attempts of others – to live experimentally – is it with nourishment or is it by a hasty 'squashing'? We acknowledge the power of this 'squashing', as well as the marginalisation of those less seen amongst Friends. We need to challenge the "well-established hierarchy of experience and age."

We have reflected deeply on the need to accept our own vulnerability in bringing our hopes and visions and needs to our spiritual community. From this starting point of humility, we need to develop Friends' gifts for teaching and guiding others, or speaking with confidence and clarity, for providing leadership and authority with tenderness. We have affirmed that Elders have a particular responsibility to make opportunities for spiritual development available. They need to work within a shared understanding of their role. They also need to ongoing support to gain confidence and skills. All of us, however, can be gifts in nurturing one another and new Friends.

We have heard of a thirst for new ideas, of taking Fox's call literally to live 'experimentally' – being radically flexible in trying out new forms of worship, laying down our structures and meeting the world's seekers as they are, stripping back our current ideas to allow the Spirit to name our priorities.

We have felt the fire that so energised early Friends in our time together. Meetings that are burning with the power of the Spirit are those most able to shine the Spirit out into the world around us: we are the first Quakers of the 21st Century.

Red Threshing Group Minute to Conference

Still processing the many inspiring and challenging contributions written and spoken in previous sessions, we set out to ask “What do we want our Meetings to be like?”

We envisage Quaker Communities where the diversity of society is mirrored: where everyone is valued and differences are celebrated in deed as well as word. By giving ourselves permission to make decisions, worship and witness experimentally the variety of gifts of all could be developed by mutual support, and each individual could find their ministry.

We are not scared of radical change of our structures and systems if they are squashing the Spirit. Unconstrained by a rigid uniformity, the spiritual vibrancy of the Quaker community could grow whether in the Meeting House, in homes, or elsewhere and spread out into the locality and the world around us.

Together, through worship, discernment and trust, meetings will find a contemporary passion and inspiration for our faith and practice.

How do we achieve this? Now the Spirit flowed and there were more suggestions than we could minute.

The following hopefully encapsulate the main points from our discussion.

1. Properly train and support Elders.
2. Encourage AMs to find a balance between business and education using discussion, inspirational speakers and technology.
3. Evaluate and USE existing materials (don't reinvent the wheel).
4. Allow meetings to alter structures to suit their circumstances (many examples were produced here).
5. Encourage experimental worship and share good practice.
6. Be more explicit about our business methods and why we use them.
7. Encourage a climate within which plain speaking is encouraged.
8. Be prepared to use co-ordinators who research, facilitate and act as catalysts on a local basis.

Red Threshing Group List from Flip Board

How could we achieve this?

- Properly trained Elders, including interactive skills
- Use good inspirational speakers (utilising technology and Quaker Life Network and Woodbrooke)
- Reviewing Area Meeting function – balance between business and education
- Encourage all Quakers (members and attenders) to engage more
- Evaluate and use existing materials (Being Friends Together) to facilitate insights and change

- Critical Friend (an experienced Quaker) to look at our spiritual practice (Spiritual Friend): Being Friends Together)
- Share experiences/good practice, intervisitation, spiritual review
- Allow Meetings to alter structures to meet their needs
- Meeting for Worship at other times – alternative to Sunday or as an addition
- Mentoring people in roles and having Job Descriptions
- Encourage and support individuals and groups in prayer and reading
- However Eldership is practiced – need on-going support, self-development, encouragement to retreat, on-line support
- Openness and preparation to welcome Children and Young People – which may mean meeting at different times
- Tinkering or 10 years of naval gazing is not what we want. Be led into action ‘form follows action’. Quality, not structure, is important. Plain speaking encouraged – being explicit ‘truth in love’ may appear as ‘blunt or rude’.
- Replicate Young Friends General Meeting – every time we use a practice explain why we do it that way. Guts of Quaker practice exposed. If practice doesn’t work examine why.
- Two main institutions which support and enable Quaker Meetings around the country. How might this expertise be expanded and cascade to Meetings? The Spirit will bubble up wherever. Why do we need anything extra – might we better use what we already have? E.g. Quaker Life Network, Woodbrooke. To help people find solutions.
- Capacity issue – how do we disseminate? Expertise at Friends House Woodbrooke. In the United States some Area Meetings have paid co-ordinators who research, facilitate, act as catalysts. Regional ‘staff’ might be and answer. How do we release people to serve locally/regionally? Paid roles needed in the regions....to be enablers.
- Bear in mind small meetings of 10 worshippers.
- Waiting on the Spirit to show us our priorities: e.g.
 - Selling Meeting Houses that are not accessible
 - Laying down separate Eldership
 - Spiritual enablers
 - Encourage ‘Allowed’ Meetings
 - Encourage the holding of Meeting for Worship outside of Meeting Houses
 - Supporting and challenging of new members before and after (Membership Process)
 - Experiments with Meeting for Worship
 - 30 minute ‘worship’ 30 minute business on-line;
 - Light Groups;
 - All Age;
 - Semi programmed

Blue Threshing Group Minute to Conference

- We have found a shared sense of purpose together this weekend and want to go out and share it with all people, Quakers and beyond.
- Frances of Assisi said “Preach the gospel at all times, use words if you must.” George Fox said “Let your lives speak.” We need to be open about faith in deed and word.
- We are excited by the power of twelve. Groups big enough to be resilient, resourceful and supportive; small enough to be close, challenging, truthful and empowering.
- In such groups we can be free to express what is going on for us, knowing that it will be accepted and loved, not necessarily agreed with or even understood. Through the expression and articulation of our inner thoughts we have found we thresh out what is important. This refining assists our authenticity so that we and others may understand that of God more clearly.
- We encourage ourselves and Friends generally to be bold and brave – talking from the heart – reaching out and touching each other. Being faithful in the market place as Jesus was.
- Quote: “...the purpose of the meeting for worship is, as its name implies, primarily to worship God, although the term ‘God’ must have widely different meanings for different worshippers. ...”
- taken from the 1975 Swarthmore Lecture The Sense of Glory a psychological study of peak-experiences (author) Ralph Hetherington, (publisher) Friends Home Service Committee, London. (ISBN 0 85245 1172)

Yellow Threshing Group Minute to Conference

WE HAVE SO MUCH AWESOME STUFF

The presentations have stimulated us to reflect on our Quaker strengths and the ways in which we could minister our insights to those in spiritual need.

What are we Quakers uniquely called to be, to do, to minister as individuals and Meetings?

We need:

- To find the courage to challenge what one blogger called ‘the Quaker art of squashing’ that prevents our passion and energy getting through,
- To allow our structures to evolve so that they support our spiritual practice,
- To develop our understand of leadership which enables us all to find and use our gifts,
- To give ourselves permission to make mistakes, take risks and dare to live life more adventurously,
- To be genuinely open to all so as to become a more inclusive community, to name our Spiritual gifts and use them.

When we become who we are meant to be we experience and embody peace, love and joy. That is true resurrection.

Green Threshing Group Minute to Conference

We have come together with heartfelt needs and have tried to bring our own positive energy to the task.

We felt that these questions need to be more deeply explored:

- How can we strengthen the connection between worship and stillness?
- How can we better manage our knowledge and resources and pass on the wisdom in our tradition?
- How do we find a way of enabling those with a sense of vocation and calling to express this fully in our community? However, not all are so called and we need to acknowledge all ministry and gifts in our community.
- How do we support Friends regionally and make the most of modern technology while not becoming fragmented? In order to create a vibrant community we recognise the importance of a diverse society. Spiritual development and ministry spring from a place of love. How can we ensure that these are available to all regardless of age, class, education, ability or money?
- We have heard a need for a healing ministry and spiritual accompaniment. We need to think about what the Religious Society of Friends might look like if we were all ordained. How would that change us? We are not a collection of individuals but a community seeking transformation of ourselves and the world. We are excited and curious about the Kindlers plans for Laboratories of the Spirit.

Although we have phrased these as questions it is essential for us to turn them into solutions.

We thank the Kindlers for facilitating this gathering of 90 Friends. We have been united in our desire to find ways to Kindle the Fire.

Orange Threshing Group Minute to Conference

Preface: Quaker Faith and Practice 10.13

Our life is love, and peace, and tenderness; and bearing one with another, and forgiving one another, and not laying accusations one against another; but praying one for another, and helping one another up with a tender hand. Isaac Pennington, 1667

Quakerism has moved through different stages in its history. Are we on the threshold of a new age of Quakerism?

We seek a deeper, more disciplined expression of the Quaker way and we know this to be needed immediately

- for the sake of resistance, resilience and movement,
- and for the sake of the community that we celebrate when we each come into our own power, gifts, leadings and ministry
- and for the sake of the core principles that undergird our faith.

We have an opportunity to begin this movement before next Yearly Meeting Gathering.

Whenever change has taken place there has been resistance – people have moved out but people have moved in – let us not be afraid.

There is great truth to be found in early Friends. These truths have not changed. We need to truly understand ourselves and our Quaker tradition.

We need to take the opportunity to go deeply with one another in our Meetings. We may need the help of others to do this work. If our Meetings gather deeply energy will increase and this will bear fruit. Fruit is not something we can create; it is something that will come because the centre is right.

There are many parts of our organisation that can support our work – Friends House, Woodbrooke, Kindlers. Can they help to create a coherent plan to support Meetings, giving them the opportunity to have the deep conversation needed to express our faith with confidence?

Quaker Faith and Practice 10.13.

And this is the word of the Lord God to you all, and a charge to you all in the presence of the living God: be patterns, be examples in all countries, places, islands, nations, wherever you come, that your carriage and life may preach among all sorts of people, and to them; then you will come to walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in every one. George Fox 1656