

News from the Centre

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Towards a Better Understanding of Israel/Palestine



John Cockroft reports on a gathering of Quakers and Jews, held at Bull Street FMH on Sunday 19 May 2019.

We began by hearing from Michael Kretzmer, a journalist and broadcaster, and a member of Birmingham Progressive Synagogue. Michael, who has lived in Israel and travelled in the Muslim world, including the Palestinian territories, offered an introduction to the conflict since the Balfour Declaration of 1947. Michael argued that the 1947 partition resolution was

accepted by Jews, but not Arabs, and went on to deal briefly with the subsequent and ongoing history. Israel, a very democratic country in which Arabs enjoy considerable freedom and opportunity, has been widely misrepresented and misunderstood. Michael said he did not condone illegal settlements or the occupation. However, in his view, Gaza is controlled by a radical Arab organisation intent on destroying Israel, which like any other country, has the right to defend itself.

Sharon Booth, spoke about the work of *Solutions Not Sides*, a UK based charity which she founded and now directs. *Solutions Not Sides* sets up meetings in schools where an Israeli and a Palestinian young person go in together to tell their stories and encourage the students to discuss the situation and consider possible ways forward. Members of the two communities need to meet and discuss their fears, hopes and needs, which are the same for both.

Lynn and Dave Morris from Stourbridge Meeting spoke with passion about their work in Palestine, and about initiatives encouraging peace activists from both communities to work together, particularly the *Parents Circle Family Forum* which brings together bereaved parents from both sides of the divide. Lynn and Dave have worked for 11 years with a Palestinian women's cooperative in the village of Seir, which seeks to help Palestinian children complete their education despite the disruption caused by Israeli incursions.

The discussion continued in small groups, followed by a plenary final session. In the groups we reflected on the complexities of the situation and the need for grass roots ventures which bring people together.

In the closing plenary the main speakers were joined by Brian Cooper, who pointed out that Israel was a young country and was still finding its way, Brian also mentioned that the words "Its ways are ways of blessedness and its paths are paths of peace" are said in synagogues every week when the Torah is put away. The need to build bridges was reiterated.

This was a useful afternoon, We didn't come up with comprehensive solutions, or indeed any long view of what outcome we hoped for (other than peace!), nor could we have done, given the absence of direct Palestinian input, but we did affirm the small steps being taken by many. We agreed that it would be good if Sharon Booth could organise a session for us on the lines of those she runs in schools.

One of the most telling comments, I felt, was that of Michael Kretzmer, who towards the end of the afternoon said that, as a speaker, he was used to having to fight to defend his position and the rights of Israel, but would have given a completely different talk had he realised how he would be received and heard in a meeting set up by Quakers and based around silence and listening.

Peace Education in Kosovo

Stourbridge Quakers Diana and John Lampen report on a visit to Kosovo:

At the 2018 Church & Peace international Conference in the UK, we met Faton and Kajmelina Berisha who lead the Victory Church, a small evangelical church in Gjakove, Kosovo. The evangelical churches association has recently been recognised by the Kosovo



Two Roma boys act out the "Two Mules" poster.

government as a legitimate religious organisation alongside Islam and the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches.

Victory Church was started by a small group in 2000 when the war ended, and immediately began ministering to the dispossessed, regardless of their faith. Their work was recognised by some Christian donor agencies from outside the country, who gave them resources to distribute. This won them acceptance in their community. They recently lent their church building to their Muslim neighbours to celebrate Eid, and joined in the party.

They run a dynamic youth programme in the city and surrounding villages, sharing Christian principles but open to children of every faith. They invited us to visit them in April to offer them methods of peace education and conflict resolution to include in their programme. So for four days we engaged with enthusiastic groups of youngsters aged between six and sixteen. We used games and exercises to practice the skills of communication, co-operation and mutual respect. We tried to show how these help to build win-win solutions when there is disagreement. We were astonished how often even the youngest children, with no previous experience of this way of learning, could pinpoint the significance of each game.

Kosovo is still grappling with many problems and tensions. We hope we have empowered the Victory Church Youth Team to contribute to a brighter and more harmonious future. We had great fun with them, and the best of welcomes and support.

The Great Pillar Party

William Waddilove reports on changes at Coventry Peace House, supported by local Quakers:

We held a party for something that was not there!

Those of you who know the Peace House will know it is a row of terraces house of the two-up two-down style. When the row of houses was bought it was almost derelict and in the great renovation work was to make it more useable for its new vision. The end two houses had the plan to be one big open room. The plans were drawn up and the steel bought and then the original builders ceased trading. The result, due mainly to lack of finance as the project had always been 'closely funded', was not to hire a crane but cut the 6.5metre beam in half and build a supporting pillar.

Three years ago Beth Ash asked me if we could do something about the pillar. It was a long story but we made it. So many thanks to all who supported the project and helped with money.



The cutting of the ribbon, Beth, William, Hugh a donor and Nathan a user. The Pillar cake has three candles for the length of the project.

Peacemakers: Peace Platform

Central England Quakers' branch

Peacemakers (West Midlands Quaker Peace Education Project) report on a special event held with young people:



As part of our Minus Violence Plus Peace Project we worked with groups of young people to provoke discussions around peace as a counter to the violence experienced daily in music, on TV and in relationships. In these sessions the young people shared their thoughts about the idea of minus violence plus peace. Some of their messages to others include:

'There is always someone to help you, don't use weapons.'

'If you are in a drug gang you can't get out.'

'I would like to tell people my experience of stuff and I would also want to listen to what they have to say. I would want to tell them who I am and see how similar they are.'

'There is a box in school to put names of people who carry knives. I would use it to save a life.'

To further promote these messages, we held a Peace Platform Event, where we brought together the young people from the schools we had worked with. Our Peace Platform Event was an opportunity for the young people to explore and solidify the messages they wanted

to share after the Minus Violence Plus Peace Project. The event evoked thought-provoking discussions surrounding the idea of reducing violence and promoting peace.

To celebrate the success of the Minus Violence Plus Peace Project we filmed the Peace Platform Event and interviewed some of those involved in our project. To watch the video visit peacemakers.org.uk

Get Involved with Roots of Resistance

Coventry Quaker Vicky Cowell explains how Roots of Resistance is opposing the arms trade, and how you can get involved:



Roots of Resistance is a community of Friends building a creative, vibrant and radical Quaker response to the Defence and Security Equipment International (DSEI) arms fair.

'Refusal to fight with weapons is not surrender. We are not passive when threatened by the greedy, the cruel, the tyrant, the unjust. We will struggle to remove the causes of impasse and confrontation by every means of non-violent resistance available.'

Quaker Faith & Practice 24.10

Roots of Resistance is planning to build an unprecedented Quaker presence at the 2019 fair, standing together against DSEI and the global arms trade. Our ambition is to mobilise



Meeting for Worship at the DSEI protests in 2017

1000 Quakers to take action against DSEI in September 2019. Taking place in east London every two years, DSEI is a huge trade show bringing together 1,500 arms companies with representatives from militaries from around the world. Some of the world's largest companies market tanks, planes, drones, rifles, ammunition, surveillance technology, training and a huge array of other weapons.

In witnessing our testimony to peace, Friends have been driven to join the movement of resistance to this arms fair, which brings global human rights violations to our doorstep. I have signed up to be an area organiser and can confirm action will be focused on a 'No Faith in War' The day will see various faith groups taking part and is confirmed for Tuesday 3rd September. Another general day of resistance that is being focused on is Saturday 7th September. We can make plans to travel together and Roots of Resistance can help with organising willing Quaker hosts or potentially other accommodation for staying in London if needed.

If you are interested in taking part, I (and Roots of Resistance) would love to hear from you - you don't have to be an experienced activist! We hope that Roots of Resistance can be a

framework for Quaker action against injustice and oppression well into the future.

For more information please contact Vicky Cowell at Coventry meeting, Lynn Morris at Stourbridge meeting, or Pete Doubtfire at Peace Hub.

rootsofresistance.org.uk

Helping Each Other Up with a Tender Hand

Ruth Gaston reflects on Children's Meetings in CEQ and encouraging intervisitation of Children's Meetings

Warwick Meeting has been struggling for some time with finding sufficient DBS checked adults willing to serve the Children's Meeting. We have a small CYPC committee made up of three of us (two being parents). Recently another parent in our meeting wrote an enlightening report about the state of volunteering and brought to light that an alarmingly high number of our children's sessions are covered by three of the parents at Warwick

At one of our CYPC meetings we considered that many of the children of our meeting come to Warwick because it has a Children's Meeting each week that is lively and fun. My nearest meeting is Coventry but I go to Warwick with my three kids, we have another young person from Coventry who comes to Warwick. We have two children that come from Rugby area and another two that come from Solihull area. We know that people have reasons as to why they are unable to help, hence we are reaching out to the area meeting in the hope there might be some people who

can volunteer. Our children's meeting is very rich and anyone with a DBS check and an interest to volunteer would be welcome as a helper or main topic leader. If you have an interest would you let John Sheldon (John coordinates the rota), John Harding, Annie Pettifer or Ruth Gaston know of your willingness to help even if it is just once a year.

The other thing we have been doing at Warwick is intervisitation of other meetings. This year our Children's Meeting visited Rugby Meeting and later in the year they returned a visit to our Meeting. We found this hugely enlivening for both Meetings. Can we encourage this to happen a bit more in CEQ? This might be a way to help Meetings who currently have no children to have a practice in preparation for new shoots.

I am excited about new life in Quakers and am full of ideas. Thank you for listening.

Warwick CYPC are: John Harding, Annie Pettifer, Ruth Gaston with John Sheldon coordinating our volunteer rota)

Reflection on Church & Peace

Birmingham Quaker Pete Doubtfire reflects on attending a Church & Peace conference on behalf of Central England Quakers Peace Committee.



Church & Peace is a European ecumenical network of organisations committed to peace and grounded in Christian faith.



Church & Peace participants at the 'One Europe for All' march

The conference began with an opportunity for people to share what was happening in their organisation or region. Those represented at the conference ranged from a contemplative order of nuns engaged in reconciliation work, to a group of French Quakers and others opposing the Eurosatory arms fair, via people working with marginalised groups in their communities, and those who lobby national governments and the EU on peace issues.

Having been staying in a leafy suburb of Berlin, on Saturday afternoon we decamped to a church in a more deprived area of the city. The Refo church is attempting to respond to local needs, including the lack of affordable housing and social divisions, by creating a community where people can live out their faith. Some church-members live on site, and others in their own homes, but everyone gets stuck in, with no formal priest or minister. They are flexible with their worship, having prayer meetings at different times of the week in community venues, and holding festivals and events in partnership with marginalised groups. Some food-for-thought for Quakers as we consider power and privilege.

The Refo church played host to Church & Peace's 70 anniversary celebrations, with past and present members recalling key moments from the organisation's history, then we looked to the future, with 6 speakers giving a brief introduction to peace work that we could learn from, covering climate justice, community work, creative activism, anti-nuclear campaigning and human rights. These final speakers had to give their presentations in a 'PechaKucha' style, that is - showing 20 images and speaking to each image for just 20 seconds. On the final morning we had an opportunity to chose a workshop with one of the 6 PechaKucha speakers to hear about their project in more detail, and report back what Church & Peace might take away. We really valued maintaining a grounding in faith, even when reaching out. Throughout the weekend we shared ecumenical, multi-lingual worship, including lots of singing.

Something else that stood out was a desire for more opportunities for encounter and creative sharing. So often, the most important part of conferences is the conversations and connections made over meals or cups of coffee. Before leaving Berlin, several of us went to join the 'One Europe for Everyone' demonstration (pictured above) in support of equality and inclusion, particularly in the context of the EU elections. It felt positive to round off the weekend with a display of solidarity across borders, languages and faiths. That, after all, is what Church & Peace is all about.

Qur'anic memorial service

Claire Bowman, CEQ Ecumenical and Interfaith Coordinator, reflects on a moving service for the victims of terrorism.

A dozen Central England Quakers joined mourners at the Bahu Trust mosque in Balsall Heath Birmingham on Friday the 22nd of March for a Qur'anic memorial service to mark a week since the attack on two mosques in Christchurch New Zealand.

The event was hosted by Abdullah Rehman, and began with a beautiful recitation from the Quran by Shaykh Nadi, a professional Quran reciter: "Had God willed He would have made us a single community . . . so compete with each other in doing good. . . . We make no distinction between the Prophets (including Jesus) To God we submit. . . ."

Imam Ghulam Rasool, a Trustee & Vice Chairman of Bahu Trust spoke first. "Let not this divide us" he said. "In fact it will bring us together". He said that the leadership shown in New Zealand has shown a new way for the whole world. "Islam", he said, "is not taking over countries. Muslims have a long history of



People of different faiths came together to mourn and reflect.

living with others". His father had been a Corporal in the British army. "We live in a world with people trying to divide us. Be on the side of righteousness and justice. It is our faith that gets us through this. Ask how can I be better? stronger? We need to build strong cohesive communities so that evil cannot trump us. Community is about reaching out to churches, synagogues, gurdwaras."

James Lynch from Riverside Church spoke next. He had bought flowers the day after the massacre and handed them out to people leaving Birmingham's Central Mosque. He hoped that his actions had sent "sparks of life against a backdrop of utter distress".

Ruth Jacobs offered reflection from a Jewish perspective. "What can we do to make a difference?" Ruth had sent emails from Birmingham's Jewish community to many Birmingham mosques. Messages of thanks came back. "We have to build bridges, take little steps towards each other, building a language that will be for all of us." In a prayer she asked that we may appreciate the spirituality of diversity

Ajit Singh spoke next, a Sikh from the Nishkam Centre. "We are all responsible for our words and actions and will have to account for them. It is a time for faiths to draw upon their teachings to instil in all of us good ways of thinking and speaking. We need to nurture good human beings. There should be no 'stranger' no 'other'."

We then viewed a video from West Midlands

mayor Andy Street and also heard from Inspector Neil Kirkpatrick of the West Midlands police. "Hate crimes will not be tolerated."

The last speaker was Arousa Tahir, Manager at the Birmingham Quran Academy. She recited a poem by Jinghan Naan, penned in the aftermath of the New Zealand attacks. We were reminded that in Muslim spirituality you can pass meritorious acts to the dead as gifts, thus our presence there together was as a gift to those who had departed.

The event finished with another recitation from the Qur'an and we were encouraged to write in the book of condolence. There was such a lovely atmosphere of welcome and hospitality. As I left people were still enjoying cups of tea and conversation. I love my city.



Book of remembrance at the Qur'anic memorial service.