

Meeting for Sufferings Report

'Residential' Meeting held by zoom videoconferencing 2nd – 4th October 2020

This Meeting for Sufferings would have been/should have been the residential weekend at Woodbrooke, but as coronavirus made that impossible we met on zoom for four sessions over the weekend: session 1 on Friday evening, sessions 2 and 3 on Saturday morning, session 4 on Sunday morning. The papers for the weekend came to 118 pages, all the reports can be found and read by following this link:

<https://www.quaker.org.uk/our-organisation/meeting-for-sufferings/papers-and-minutes>

Main agenda items:

- Sustainability and the climate crisis;
- Quaker Peace and Social Witness Central Committee Strategy;
- Britain Yearly meeting Trustees;
- Responding to Racism;
- Review of Quaker Stewardship Committee;
- Annual Report from Quaker committee for Christian and Interfaith Relations;
- Report from the book of discipline Revision Committee
- Yearly Meeting 2020

Before the first substantive item we took appointments, and Margaret Bryan and Robert Card were appointed clerk and assistant clerk of Meeting for Sufferings for 2021.

Sustainability and the climate crisis

a) report from the sustainability monitoring group: this was presented by the group's clerks, Peter Avis and Caroline Howden. The Sustainability Monitoring Group (SMG) exists to help MfS review whether Quakers in Britain are meeting our commitment to becoming a low-carbon, sustainable community. The committee did a thorough and thoughtful job; the report was well received by Meeting for Sufferings, concluding that we are working hard and have much to celebrate. It begins by working through the five broad areas of Eldership, Oversight, Living Faithfully, Right Ordering, and Witness, from Recommendations for Action (MfS Feb 2017), and giving examples of progress.

b) update on the project: 'climate crisis: spiritual nurture and learning': Maud Grainger reported to us that BYM has recently funded Woodbrooke to undertake a five year project to strengthen the spiritual underpinning of our Quaker response to the climate crisis. The project will nurture our individual and collective grounding and encourage practical witness to transform our lives. The three main aims of the project are: to support Friends to explore and understand the spiritual underpinning of Quaker commitment to caring for the earth – this will include a study pack or Quaker eco-theology, and working with the Quaker Ats network on the Loving Earth Project; to provide advice, guidance and support to enable Friends to make lifestyle changes – courses and workshops will be provided, resources on lifestyle changes, facilitated sessions for meetings to enable them to work through potential changes to their property; to build community to support and strengthen our individual and corporate response – National Gatherings are planned for 2021.

c) Quaker Peace and Social Witness (QPSW) Economics and Sustainability programme update:
COP26: Livvy Hanks explained that all the work of this programme is now to be based on

‘transforming the economy for climate justice’. BYM has applied for accreditation for the COP26 event, and is working closely with QUNO (Quaker United Nations Office) which is already an observer organisation.

Quaker Peace and Social Witness report to Meeting for Sufferings: QPSW strategy

QPSW Central Committee has been working on a new strategy for our work putting Quaker faith into action. The strategy will cover the activities of QPSW until 2025, guiding the work done and the way it is governed and overseen.

Jeff Beatty, co-clerk of QPSW Central Committee, spoke to this report, reminding us that it had already been agreed to work on fewer distinct areas but to put greater capacity into the issues that are worked on, in order to be more effective. The two priorities already decided are

- Peace and peacebuilding
- Sustainability and climate justice

But difficult decisions about what will be laid down are still to be made. We cannot do everything we want to. Meeting for Sufferings warmly welcomed the report and look forward to hearing more detail at our next meeting.

Britain Yearly Meeting Trustees

Since the last MfS in June, BTM trustees have met three times, all online, and five times altogether since the coronavirus pandemic began – that is three extra meetings, often at short notice. The work was more difficult than usual, particularly on matters of property, finance and the Quiet Company. Caroline Nursey, clerk of trustees, began by thanking all the BYM staff. They have been flexible, helpful and adaptable – many staff have been furloughed, but all staff have been retained so far. A pay freeze was agreed, and new terms on redundancy.

Linda Batten, BYM treasurer, told us of the work to keep BTM secure, but acknowledged that we will end the year with a £2million deficit, largely due to the loss of income from the Quiet Company (BYM’s hospitality business). Large legacies received at the end of last year were very helpful but there remains a need for longterm giving to increase. Plans are in place to make BYM financially sustainable by 2023

BYM is becoming a more dispersed organisation, with fewer staff working from Friends House – the Local Development Workers have been very useful, some staff have expressed a desire to continue working from home. It is going to be important to identify which work will make the most difference, and simplifying our governance structures will need ideas to work on.

There was a lot of information in this report and trustees have very obviously been working hard on our behalf. MfS felt rather challenged to have enough time for discernment of these important matters. The number of pages and reports to be read for this meeting plus the time given on the agenda for each item led a Friend to say that it wasn’t intellectually possible to give full attention to everything. This was acknowledged in the minute with Arrangements Committee being asked to consider how to address this.

Responding to Racism

In small breakout groups of five or six we explored this matter, with the following questions to consider:

- The mistreatment George Floyd faced, resulting in his death, was because of his race, class and gender. What can we in the UK learn from his death and how should we respond?
- How can we best acknowledge and help heal the wounds of the transatlantic slave trade? Quakers participated in this trade of empire, and continue to enjoy its benefits as part of the wealth of the UK today.
- How should we continue our discernment, and how can we welcome and be led by the voices and experiences of BAME people when our Society is predominantly white?

This proved to be both despairing, when each of us in my group related incidents of racism, prejudice and inequality, and inspiring, when we spoke of positive actions and events. We found the matter of Quakers and diversity the most challenging – we like to think we are welcoming and don't discriminate but our whiteness/middleclass-ness/etc etc is a barrier. This was summed up by one Friend who said we need to make statement that reach those who don't read the Guardian!

Review of Quaker Stewardship Committee

Deborah Rowlands spoke to this on behalf of the review group. QSC has existed for only 17 years. It was established to ensure and enable compliance with the changes in charity law when trustees were appointed. The recommendations in the report are to lay the QSC down and for Quaker Life Central Committee and MfS to take on the continuing work. Now that trustees, governance and accountability are embedded the essential need for QSC is no longer there. The recommendations were accepted by MfS, but this was another matter on which Friends felt we did not have enough agenda time to discern a proper decision: do we accept the work, reports and recommendations of small groups appointed to do a specific task without discussion? It was clear that more work is needed on this.

Quaker Committee for Christian and Interfaith Relations Annual Report

Over 50 members of MfS accepted the invitation to join an informal zoom session to meet members of QCCIR and to hear about some of their work.

QCCIR is responsible for keeping Britain Yearly Meeting informed of relevant issues and movements which emerge from the interchurch and interfaith life of Britain, and of opportunities for dialogue and co-operation between churches, between faiths, and between faiths and churches.

Report from the Book of Discipline Revision Committee

This was the first report to MfS of this committee, presented to us by the co-clerks Rosie Carnall and Catherine Brewer, a progress report explaining the membership of the committee, and the work so far. It was uplifting, enthusiastic and joyful. This committee has 24 members, and is the most diverse committee we have in terms of age, the nature of their Quaker background and experience, employment, geographical base...two member of the group gave birth shortly before the first meeting, these babies will provide a useful measuring stick for completing the work. Will it be before they become adults?

The initial task for the committee was to establish itself as a community. To this end they have met six times from May 2019, five of them residential weekends, and the sixth via zoom. Subgroups have been set up to work on specific tasks too. The next priority has been to explore the scope of the revision, and how to approach the task. Although it is referred to as a 'book', the committee is clear

that the material will need to be varied – printed, electronic, audio-visual and more, with different ways of accessing it. No final decisions have been made yet.

One strand of the committee's work is engaging with friends generally – on the BYM website they have created a 'Frequently Asked Questions' document, and Friends can suggest material for inclusion in the 'book'.

The report finishes with this: "We feel daunted and excited by the size and importance of our task. We welcome the support of Meeting for Sufferings and Friends generally in this." The report was received by MfS with those same feelings.

Yearly Meeting 2020

Clare Scott-Booth, clerk of BYM, updated us on the arrangements for Yearly Meeting. It will be held for essential business only and an extended period of worship on the afternoon of Sunday 15th November, via zoom. Attendance will be limited to around 1000 zoom connections; there will be no provision for children and young people. The Meeting for Worship will be clerked. Zoom guidance will be issued! Registration will open soon, and allocation of places will be on a first come first served basis.

Cathy Khurana

CEQ representative to Meeting for Sufferings