

Minutes of Central England Area Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) held at Sutton Coldfield Meeting House and online on 27th April 2024

Clerk: James Bradbury Assistant Clerk: Paula Button
Elder/Pastoral Friend: Fiona Waterhouse

2024.030 Worship

We have observed a period of stillness during which we heard of the death of our Friend Marion Millington (WAR) on 29th March 2024 aged 85.

We also heard two passages from Quaker Faith and Practice, 15.02 and parts of 15.04

15.02: As members of the Religious Society of Friends we are all called upon to exercise stewardship over the Society's resources. This is stewardship in its widest sense: ensuring that money and buildings are used wisely and well; that business decisions are taken in right ordering; that all within a meeting, both its members and its employees, are supported and helped to play a full role in the Society's affairs; that the meeting's children are cared for and nurtured; that eldership and oversight flourish. We are all called to participate in building a responsible and caring community.

As with elders and overseers, clerks and treasurers, some will be asked to take on a special care for this stewardship for a number of years, acting as trustees of our meetings. They take this role for a period and then relinquish this service to others.

15.04 (part): Friends who accept service as trustees take on specific and personal responsibility, on behalf of the meeting, for the obligations that rest on all Friends.

The commandment that we love our neighbours manifests itself for trustees as a duty to ensure, among other things, that the meeting fulfils the requirements of health and safety and child protection. Our love is diminished if, through our carelessness, we let our neighbours suffer.

The obligation to ensure the right use of our corporate resources requires trustees to take and weigh and act upon expert advice on, for example, law and good practice in employment, building maintenance and investment.

2024.031 Representatives

The following Local Meetings are represented: BGR, BOU, BUL, COT, COV, HAL, KIN, SEL, SOL, STO, SUT, WAL and WAR.

The clerks welcome the following Attenders joining us today:

Richard Begg (SUT), Lorna Foster (SOL), Mary Mather (WAL), Ian Taylor (SUT), Fran Wilde (SEL)

We also welcome Sarah Barker, Principal Officer

2024.032 How the Truth has prospered at Sutton Coldfield Meeting

We have received a report from Sutton Coldfield Meeting informing us of how the Truth has prospered over the last year. The report reads as follows:

Friends have generally returned to attending Meeting for Worship in person during 2023, though we continued to hold blended Meetings for Worship every week. Zoom and the equipment necessary became something of an issue for us. Giving everyone a time to share their feelings on the matter enabled us to find a compromise, and we now hold an in person only Meeting every 4th Sunday, which is also our afternoon Meeting.

Shared lunches and shared afternoon tea on 4th Sundays are our most frequent fellowship activity; we tidy up the garden together from time to time; have a regular but infrequent book club; our Making a Difference group for small actions on sustainability continues every 3rd Saturday.

The funeral of our Friend Judith Sanderson was held at the Meeting House in November, attended by more than 90 people, most of whom were not Quakers. Members of the Meeting came together to support Judith's family with the organisation, celebration of her life, and provision of refreshments.

2024.033 ecobirmingham report

We have received a (written) annual update from ecobirmingham which has been published in the Area Meeting papers, and have been pleased to welcome CEO Simon Slater to speak to the report. The report aims to update CEQ on ecobirmingham's progress in 2023 and plans for 2024.

An illustrated Impact Report for the financial year April 2022 to March 2023 is available on request (please contact the CEQ office for a copy by email or hard copy).

A separate detailed summary of the relationship between CEQ and ecobirmingham, and how over the last 5 years this has changed, has been sent to CEQ Trustees for their consideration. The summary encourages us to think about how our support for ecobirmingham could contribute to our "testimony or witness" to Birmingham, and help us to engage and support more diverse and younger generations. We hope that Trustees will bring the key points from the summary, including a request for a 3-year support programme, to a future Area Meeting as part of a wider consideration of CEQ spending plans and priorities for 2025.

Simon drew our attention to some significant achievements in 2023, under the headings of:-

- headline outcomes,
- outreach,
- improved physical and mental health,
- reduction of greenhouse gases and air pollution,
- increased training and skills in sustainable living & creating "readiness" for "green jobs"

These outcomes are impressive, and we congratulate Simon and his team on their achievements.

We were pleased to learn of ecobirmingham's plans for 2024, which cover both city-wide support and in-depth focussed support.

In the Q & A session which followed the presentation, Simon was asked how the various "strands" of sustainability work in which we are involved might work closer together – eg Climate Emergency Action, Footsteps and ecobirmingham. Simon suggested that if we have specific areas of interest where ecobirmingham's expertise would be relevant, they would be glad to work with us.

We thank Simon for his report.

2024.034 Trustees' report on the work of trustees in 2023

We have received a written report from Gill Smith, Clerk to Trustees.

The main work of trustees this year has been:-

- Adjusting to different ways of working
- Safeguarding training for trustees and for volunteers in post across the AM
- Discerning the future for some of our property so that it does not become a liability
- Supporting the work of our AM in developing the vision "What does Love require of us"
- Managing our reduced finances with no contribution from Priory Rooms

At the end of 2023 there were ten serving trustees. Trustees met five times in February, May, August and October and held an extraordinary meeting in February. During 2023 trustees recruited and appointed Helen Waters as business support administrator to work alongside Sarah Barker, our Principal Officer.

The trustees are responsible for the charity's governance and compliance as set out in the Governing

Document. The Governing Document sets out the responsibilities of trustees and defines their role and also that of the Area and Local Meetings. One of trustees' responsibilities is to report annually to Area Meeting in session so that Friends can question and be reassured that property, finance, employment, and records are all being well managed and that risks are identified and reviewed regularly.

Since the Principal Officer, Sarah Barker has been in post trustees have been relieved of much of the burden of routine governance matters, leaving trustees more time to consider and discern the more difficult and strategic issues around finances, property and employment.

During the year the service committees each met quarterly and the report details the work undertaken in relation to finance, property, employment, records and safeguarding. Matters for discernment were brought to trustees' quarterly meetings. When necessary, these decisions were taken to Area Meeting in session for further discernment or for information.

Local Meetings and Branches have a significant degree of autonomy, but compliance with the governing document is monitored informally by the linked trustees and formally by the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) that is reviewed every year by the constituent Local Meetings and Branches.

There were some particular challenges in 2023. It was the third year without a Priory Rooms gift, at the same time there was the increased expense of hiring a Principal Officer. This meant that trustees prepared a deficit budget for a third consecutive year. Local Meetings responded well to an appeal to help Area Meeting financially during 2023 and will be asked to help in the same way in 2024. Friends were reminded that we cannot afford to continue running down our funds in this way and trustees hope that the "What does Love Require of Us" exercise will help Friends focus on a way forward within our resources. We should also consider ways of increasing our resources.

Priory Rooms (Bull Street) Ltd is the trading arm of the CEQ Charity, and is part of the trustees' responsibilities. There has been a significant recovery from the loss of business during the pandemic and rail strikes, and trustees are confident that there will be a small gift during 2024. We hope to receive a report from Priory Rooms at a future Area Meeting, as soon as the company's accounts for 2023 have been finalised.

Gill Smith concluded her report with the comment that being a trustee is an opportunity to be part of a friendly team, all of whom bring their different expertise and experience to the table. It is spiritual as well as practical. We join Gill in expressing our thanks to trustees for their support and hard work during 2023, and give our special thanks to our Principal Officer, who has not only made a huge contribution to the management of the charity, but who has also been a real help and support to Gill in her role as clerk to trustees.

2024.035 Reflections and discernment from the morning's workshop

The workshop was very well attended, with over 30 Friends present.

Two papers had been circulated in advance – a briefing paper from Trustees & Trustees Finance Committee, and the final report from the Special Working Group "What does love require of us". The working group report has not yet been sent to Local Meetings, and so a copy will be circulated with the Minutes of this meeting.

James Bradbury gave a short resume of the journey we have taken as an Area Meeting over the last couple of years to review our structures and priorities. The exercise started in May 2022 with a special area meeting held at Woodbrooke, which led to the setting up of the Special Working Group in September 2022. A follow up workshop was held at Balsall Heath Church Centre in May 2023 and the Special Working Group published its report (which contained 16 recommendations) in November 2023. At Area Meeting at Barnt Green Meeting House in October 2023 we took part in a workshop under the general heading of "initial action" and the discussion was summarised in a Minute, 2023.083.

The focus today will be the set of recommendations listed under "longer term action", from number 8 on, in particular the discernment of how we can reorganise the structure of Central England Quakers so that our resources (time, energy and money) better align with what matters most to us: making Meeting for Worship the bedrock of our lives and putting Quaker values into action in the world.

Anne Ullathorne introduced the Trustee paper, by quoting from the text of Quaker Faith & Practice 15.02 printed in the paper, and which was also read during the opening worship this afternoon. She reminded us of the different world we lived in 50 years ago when many Quakers ran businesses which enabled them to provide financial and administrative resources. She showed a slide detailing the present structure of the Area Meeting with its many Committees, Branches and projects. We are a very large Area Meeting and our structures are complicated, though over the last few years they have been progressively simplified.

We noted that every Meeting has a distinct offering, and we need to protect the individuality of Meetings but seek ways of working together, worshipping together and sharing resources.

We spent 30 minutes discussing in five small groups the three “planning for the future” options set out in the paper, also considering the needs of our own individual meetings. In a plenary session a member of each group fed back the key points from the discussions. The feedback was captured on flip charts, and these will be really useful to Trustees and Finance Committee.

Some key points arising from the morning were:-

- Local knowledge and local connections are still useful and important – more personal.
- Meeting House managers can fill this role perhaps and take care of several Meetings helping to ensure that they continue to run with a Quaker ethos.
- Managing premises centrally would be welcomed especially for major work, and annual surveys
- Providing a central function for the line management of staff would ensure compliance with legislation and reduce risks.
- Lettings may be better handled locally but the finance could be centralised
- Central coordination of communications would improve networking and make us more accessible. This might require professional input.
- Getting the right balance is important in allocating time to premises or administrative matters and our Quaker work and witness, and we need the courage and energy to seek new opportunities and ways of doing things, and new ways of meeting together.

Ministry shared in the meeting this afternoon included:-

- The need for a framework which supports us in doing what we are called to do
- With the support of the framework that we could put in place we would be freed from some of our burdens and who knows where that might lead us! Also, it gives a new type of welcome to newcomers, who will be free to worship joyfully with us.
- The importance of our work being grounded and based in our faith and our spiritual life.
- One Friend was encouraged by where we have got to with the “What does Love Require of Us” journey, and we seem to be on the right track.
- We need to appreciate that as individuals and Meetings we are at different points of the journey, and going at different speeds, so we need to care for each other.
- As noted in the workshop we should explore more opportunities to work with other neighbouring Area Meetings

2024.036 Minutes from Local Meetings

We have received Minutes from several Local Meetings which read as follows. They have been grouped under two headings a) and b) as below

a) Friends acting under concern

Minute of concern from Solihull Meeting for Business 7 April 2024

On 1 November 2023, six people, including four Friends from CEQ, were arrested and charged during a peaceful civil resistance at Telford Arms Fair. The demonstration was to condemn the

sales of arms in accordance with the Quaker Peace Testimony and to highlight the detriment to ecological sustainability and Global Climate Justice.

The trial is at Walsall Magistrates' Court from 8th to 10th May 2024. Solihull Meeting recognises the need for emotional, spiritual and financial support for Friends on trial and would ask Area Meeting to publicise the plight of our Friends and share information and request for support with all Local Meetings; especially to encourage Quakers to join others at Walsall Magistrates' Court, in person, on the days of the trial. Louise Scrivens and Lorna Foster will be attending Area Meeting on 27th April to support the minute. We ask our clerk, Lorna Foster, to forward the minute to Area Meeting via email.

**Minute 2024/13 from Selly Oak Meeting for Business, 14 April 2024
Peace Action by Friends and others at the Specialist Defence & Security Convention UK (SDSC-UK) in Telford – November 2023**

Rajan Naidu has spoken to this concern. He and Fran Wilde are two of the four Quakers arrested last November and their court case will be at Walsall Magistrates Court on May 8-10. We uphold them in their concern and agree to support them in certain practical ways, such as Selly Oak Friends and other CEQ Friends attending the day(s) of the trial. We ask that this minute is sent to CEQ Clerks.

Minute 2024/17 from Cotteridge Local Meeting, Support for peaceful civil resistance

In May, local Friends and others took action in peaceful civil resistance, bearing witness to our Quaker peace testimony and our Quaker concern for climate justice, at the Defence and Security Equipment International (DSEI 2023) in London and at the Specialist Defence & Security Convention UK (SDSC-UK 2023) in Telford. They are due to appear in court.

We have received a paper from our Friend Jo Hindley which is filed with these minutes and have had the opportunity to ask her questions. We are encouraged to give practical and spiritual support to those due to face trial, and are asked to, where possible:

- *attend court days in person to help provide emotional and spiritual support for those experiencing the court process (8-10 May at Walsall Magistrates Court for the Telford action, 13-14 May and 20-22 May at Stratford Magistrates Court, London for the DSEI action), and*
- *help alleviate the personal financial burden of individual arrestees by contributing to legal fees and court costs (details of how to do this are available from Jo Hindley).*

As Friends from across our Area Meeting are affected by these court proceedings, we forward this minute and Jo's paper to Area Meeting, asking it to consider the support of local members who are facing court processes now and in the future and to make publicly visible our testimonies to peace and climate justice.

Heather Rowlands, Clerk, Cotteridge Local Quaker Meeting

We want our Friends (and other non-Quakers) who are acting under concern (consistent with our living Peace Testimony) to know that they are being prayerfully supported by the whole Area Meeting. We encourage Friends to provide emotional, spiritual and financial support to those facing trial, and to join others at Walsall Magistrates' court in person on the days of the trial. Jo Hindley is willing to be contacted for further information.

We also need to look ahead to forthcoming Arms Fairs and to maintain a constant pressure.

b) Revision of Book of Discipline – wording of marriage declaration

Minute 2024/12 from Cotteridge Local Meeting, Revision of Quaker Faith and Practice

We have received the following minute from Area Meeting held on 27 January 2024:

2024.008. Revision of Book of Discipline

The book of discipline revision committee have two draft chapters, nominations and marriage, available for comment, as part of a consultation exercise. The draft chapters and a form for comments and suggestions are available on this webpage <https://quaker.org.uk/resources/quaker-faith-and-practice/revising-quaker-faith-practice>

A particular query is whether the terms of the Quaker Marriage Declaration should require both parties to state that they will be loving and devoted partners with “God’s help or with Divine assistance” – as it does at present.

This is an important issue - Local Meetings and individual Friends are encouraged to study this material and participate in the consultation by offering discernment, using the form provided.

Friends can also suggest ideas and specific passages for inclusion in the new Book of Discipline.

Although the clerks are not presently planning a sharing of views at Area Meeting level, we will be pleased to receive Minutes from Local Meetings on this topic, via the CEQ Office.

A discussion about this was held on Sunday 3 March. Individuals are also welcome to respond.

We ask that Central England Area Meeting set aside some time for us to engage with this matter

The Clerks have agreed to set aside some time for Friends to engage with this matter at Area Meeting in May 2024. Any Minutes from Local Meetings on this topic sent to the Office by 7 May (including Minutes from Bournville and Bull Street Meetings already received) will be published in the papers for the Area Meeting in May.

2024.037 Membership

(a) Deaths

We record the death of our Friend Marion Millington (WAR) on 29th March 2024 aged 85 – details of her funeral on 2 May have been circulated to Clerks.

b) Applications

We have received an application for membership from Julia Bodorin (WAR). We ask our Nominations Committee to find Friends to visit her and to report back to us with the names.

(c) Transfer out request

Jonathan Collinson (COT) has requested that his membership be transferred to York Area Meeting.

(d) Transfers out accepted

We record the completion of the transfer out of the following Friends: Tony Green (BOU) to Worcestershire and Shropshire Area Meeting and John & Marian Sheldon (WAR) to Pendle Hill Area Meeting.

(e) Internal Transfer

David Foxhall from SUT to WAL

2024.038 Nominations

a) Nominations Committee suggests:

Roger Chapman (WAR) to serve on Trustees Employment Committee for another triennium from June 2024 to May 2027

Steve Pullan (COV) to serve on Trustees Property Committee for another triennium from May 2024 to April 2027

Mina Tilt (HAL) to serve on Trustees Property Committee for another triennium from June 2024 to May 2027

Anne Giles (BOU) to serve on Trustees Property Committee for another triennium from June 2024 to May 2027

Edward Creasy (BOU) to serve on Trustees Property Committee for a triennium from May 2024 to April 2027

Fiona Waterhouse (SUT) to serve on Records Advisory Committee for another triennium from June 2024 to May 2027

Margot Williams (SUT) to serve as Meeting for Sufferings Representative from Yearly Meeting 2024 to Yearly Meeting 2027

Nicholas Paton Philip (STO) to serve as Meeting for Sufferings Alternate from Yearly Meeting 2024 to Yearly Meeting 2027

Clare Barnett (HAR) to serve on Children and Young People's Committee for another triennium from June 2024 to May 2027

Nicholas Paton Philip (STO) to serve on Peacemakers Management Committee for a triennium from May 2024 to April 2027

Richard Taylor (BOU) to serve as a trustee of the Woodlands Management Committee for another triennium from April 2024 to March 2027

Wendy Burnett (BUL) to serve as the Talking Friends Treasurer for a triennium from May 2024 to April 2027

These names being acceptable we appoint our Friends accordingly.

(a) Local Meetings suggest:

Bournville: Vic Grainger (BOU) to serve as an elder until the end of December 2024

Selly Oak: Rosanna Ghinai (SEL) to serve as an additional representative on Area Meeting nominations committee until the end of August 2024

These names being acceptable we appoint our Friends accordingly.

(c) Release from service:

Alan Wing (COT) from Children and Young People's Committee

Fiona Campbell (COT) as Children and Young People's Advocate from the end of May 2024

We thank our Friends for their service.

2024.039 George Fox 400

The following local events are currently planned to mark the 400th anniversary of the birth of George Fox. Details available to date are published in the Area Meeting papers.

- Celebration Day 25th May, Hartshill Meeting House, 10am to 4pm
- Fox 400 "Pilgrimage", Sunday 14th July, 1pm to 6.30pm (in conjunction with Birmingham Churches Together)
- Devotional Area Meeting, Saturday 17th August, Hartshill Meeting House
- Outreach event and film show at Barnt Green Meeting House, Sunday 29th September

For the rest of 2024 "George Fox 400" will be a recurring agenda item at Area Meetings, and we ask Local Meetings planning events to inform the CEQ office of their plans. Further details will be published as they become available.

2024.040 Thanks and next meeting

We thank Sutton Coldfield Friends for their warm welcome and hospitality today, and we thank Richard Begg for supervising the "tech". We hope to meet again, should nothing occur to prevent, on Wednesday 22nd May at Selly Oak Meeting House at 6pm. Tea will be served from 5pm. From 4.30pm there will be an opportunity to make a re-useable name badge.

Signed in and on behalf of Central England Area Meeting

James Bradbury, clerk this time