**Outreach Conference report**

I attended a Quaker outreach conference on 15th-17th Feb 2019 on behalf of Hertford & Hitchin Area Meeting. It was held at the High Leigh conference centre in Hoddesdon. There were over 80 attendees. The aim of the conference was to work, worship and explore together as a community of all ages. For everyone attending there was hope to:-

* experience being part of an inclusive, welcoming, worshipping community
* engage in outreach- actively and creatively- in their local area
* feel confident in talking about what it means to be a Quaker
* help their Quaker communities to be outward looking, welcoming and truly inclusive.

The weekend began on the Friday evening with a meal in the restaurant, worship & welcome, followed by a welcome activity where we were seated in tables of 6. Each table had a map of Britain and we placed a flag where we had travelled from. It was nice to meet others and find out where they had come from. The day ended with 15 minutes epilogue.

On Saturday morning up to 11am we heard from different Quakers coming onto the stage to tell their stories of how they found Quakers and how it became part of their lives. After refreshments at 11.30 until lunch we took part in our tables of 6 on how to "make a Quaker". This involved drawing an outline of a person onto a piece of paper and then writing words all over the person that we felt represented what we thought a Quaker should be. Words which came up on our person were :- not overbearing, welcoming smile, responsive listening, honesty, non-judgemental, personality, warm and openness. I found this interesting to find out different people’s perspectives and experiences. After lunch there were 7 workshops on offer to attend. We could choose 2 to take part in. I chose ‘Welcome & Barriers’ followed by ‘Outreach, Connection & Welcome’.

For the 'Welcome&barriers' workshop we made 2 lists on a large sheet of paper. One list, how we welcome people into the meeting and the other, what may be a barrier to new people attending. Examples of welcome were :- good intentions, existing connections, judging how and when to invite, clarity on stages of the journey ie, enquirer, attender, member. Examples of barriers were :- meeting house accessibility to disabled, audibility/ hearing, busyness can take over attending to newcomers, to minister or not to minister? and Quaker language to name a few. I found this helpful as I had never really given any thought to how meeting comes across to newcomers. Good and bad. This has inspired me to make the entrance of our meeting house more welcoming and uncluttered for newcomers. I take on board that too much overbearing literature can be a barrier.

The Outreach, connection and welcome workshop consisted of us writing on a wall what Quakerism would be if it were a building. This included words such as:- simple, useful, welcoming, warm, sheltering, adaptable, open, accessible and an eclectic mix. We then wrote on a cloud what Quakerism would be if it was the weather. This included words such as :- unpredictable, bracing, warm, good for your health, beautiful, constant, changeable, light and shade and recharging. The workshop finished off with us writing on plates what Quakerism would be if it were a meal. Examples of these words were :- filling, nourishing, simple, addictive, homemade and not always perfect. This workshop reminded me of the first impressions that attracted me to Quakerism. Saturday ended with supper and the opportunity to watch a family film or watch a stand up routine followed by worship.

Sunday morning consisted of breakfast, followed by Worship, then departures.

We had lots of opportunity to discuss our thoughts in the workshops and different activities. It was nice to talk to lots of other Quakers also interested in Outreach. I think we all benefitted from attending and took something back to our meetings. I think quite a lot were a quite disappointed and somewhat frustrated, that we didn't actually get any outreach ideas. The weekend seemed to be very focused on how we come across to newcomers as an organisation and people, rather than ideas on how to get people interested, questioning and coming in the door. A piece of paper was put on the main wall at the start of the weekend asking us to share outreach ideas, but no one wrote anything on it. Maybe this was not surprising because I felt that was the point of us being there. If we already had the ideas, I don't think we would have spent the money on attending. I'm not sure why this wasn't addressed. It was the main topic I was hoping to be covered.

Many thanks for sending me. It was useful and great to meet other Quakers with the same interest.