QLRC April 2019 Report

*Building Inclusive Quaker communities: Diversities in race, age, gender, sexuality, gender identity and class.*

The weekend conference opened with a speech from our Keynote Speaker, Edwina Peart titled ‘**Gatekeepers or Gateways’.** Edwina, a BAME researcher was specially commissioned by Friends House to conduct a survey of the diversities across all meeting houses, in a bid to gain a national picture of the changing or unchanging demographic of Quaker life in the UK. She indicated that there was a degree of resistance from some houses who felt the questions were too intrusive and therefore only received responses from 10% of those contacted. Nevertheless, this represents the widest ever survey conducted amongst Friends in the UK. She also presented the preliminary results: 1.5% identified as belonging to an ethnic minority, 2.5% European, non-British, 14% LGBTIQ, and 2% gender non-binary. From a follow up conversation with her and others, I deduced that the female/male ratio amongst the membership is in the order of 2:1.

Central to Edwina’s speech was the question: Are Quaker meeting houses Gatekeepers or Gateways? Are meeting houses trying to preserve their present image, traditions at the expense of a growing membership and becoming more inclusive or are they opening themselves up, becoming more welcoming to 'seekers' i.e. curious visitors in search of a congregation?

On the topic of 'welcoming’, the speaker spent some time on an illustrative example which seemed to pique the interest of the audience: - The 'Where are you from?' question, particularly when directed at someone with a distinct accent, or belonging to a different class or ethnicity. This question dominated the opening plenary session on the Saturday and continued across the home group and various workshop discussions. It is a question she identified as potentially off-putting if applied with the wrong tone or at an inappropriate time. In summary, she suggested it was best, if truly coming from a place of curiosity, to postpone this question until a level of trust and comfort has been established between interlocutors. Besides, she stressed the importance of the initial welcome to new and continuing attenders, which can on occasion be ‘too welcoming’, and the need to be flexible and observant of the reactions of newcomers, adapting responses accordingly.

I have to mention that there was a lot of discomfort in the hall as was evident from the Q+A session that followed the plenary as well as a lot of soul-searching and honest questioning in conversations held about diversity, prejudice and privilege in home groups, in the workshops and over the lunch and dinner breaks. But I rather welcomed it as a positive sign, as I have taken it as a rule that 'true and real progress cannot be achieved without periodic self-examination'. There was a sense (openly expressed) that the Quakers are overwhelmingly middle-class, mono-racial, female and middle-aged. However, the main conclusion and this applied across the workshops was not to feel guilty about privilege, or to become unprivileged but to recognize it and to use it for the benefit of the disadvantaged.

From the workshops and many conversations I had, I drew up a list of suggestions to improve the openness of our meeting houses, which I will share with my local warden at WGC meeting. I hope we'll be able to between us, sift through these ideas and come up with a workable and reasonable set of suggestions to share with other local wardens in the near future.

Personally, the weekend introduced me to a wider group of Quakers, very diverse, young and old, Northern and Southern, with very different stories. Stories about why they became Quakers, how they feel about being Quakers and how they express their ‘Quakerness’ in their professional and domestic lives- which is a challenge we have explored in our ‘Becoming Friends’ meetings. But across these differences, I detected a unifying strand, that bedrock beneath, the 'Light of God' displayed apparent and expressed in a manifold variety. Although the conference topic was on diversity, I experienced a sense of unity with my fellow Friends, across the many varieties of expression. It is what binds us that matters most, that deeper, invisible and universal 'Light of God' which makes us all equal beneath all surface variation.

‘A Light that is ageless, remaining ever youthful, is undivided and unified and only burns and shines brighter according as each individual lets or wills it’

To conclude, I wish to express my profound thanks to the nominations committee for granting me the opportunity to serve as Quaker Life Representative. I know not how I was regarded as qualified to serve, but I am thankful for the privilege and hope that I meet you expectations. I learnt a great deal more about the Quakers over the course of the weekend and have come to realize, or rather, to confirm my early impressions of this family of Friends. My gratitude and thanks also goes to the Area Meeting as a whole for kindly approving my nomination and for covering the cost of my 3 day stay at Woodbrooke. It truly is a wonderful site with charming and helpful staff and Friends in Residence and I would encourage anyone who is able to, to visit it if and when you can. I do not know what I was expecting, but the very aspect of it, the atmosphere chimed with my idea of what a Quaker community and study center should be like in 2019.