Meeting for Sufferings (MfS) 6 October 2018

Out of a very full agenda I highlight the following discussions.

Court and Prison Register – ongoing trial of Lyndsay Burtonshaw (an attender at Brighton Meeting) accused of terrorist offences for stopping a deportation charter flight at Stanstead Airport. She is charged alongside 14 others. This is being supported by Chelmsford Quaker Meeting, QARN and BYM’s Sanctuary Everywhere. If convicted, the 15 may receive significant custodial sentences.

Young Peoples Participation Day – We welcomed the presence of Young Adult Friends (YAF), Naomi Major, the project manager for the Engaging Young Adult Quaker (EYAQ) spoke to MfS about the proposal. As a result, an experimental process was proposed: – four places for young people to attend MfS. They do not have to be in Membership.

Centrally managed work – how is priority setting handled? Kingston and Wandsworth Area Meeting have raised this issue and it has been re-visited. There is so much to do: how are tasks and projects prioritised? There is a certain tension between MfS and BYM trustees. The legal responsibilities lie with trustees. The way forward is for trustees and sufferings representatives to trust one another, to ‘value local and individual concerns and to make our voices heard’.

Sustainability is a significant concept in our Meeting Houses, in our lives. Four questions were put:

* Is MfS content with the way the responsibilities are being shared?
* Is MfS content with meetings between groups and committees taking place in future, to provide ‘liaison and mutual encouragement‘?
* Should Woodbrooke be approached about exploring whether it could provide ways of nurturing Friends’ many forms of ministry in this field?
* Could the whole Yearly Meeting commit itself to the bold target of becoming carbon neutral or ‘net zero’ in carbon?

The first three were agreed, but as to the fourth – there would be difficulties applying these limitations to, for example, our very old Meeting Houses. MfS agreed to ask for ‘further guidance and advice’ on what it means for Meeting Houses and for centrally managed work to be ‘zero carbon’. This minute was sent to the BYM Sustainability Group. We are not yet at the end of this ‘long journey’ with regard to Sustainability.

Vibrancy in Meetings - Rachel Matthews, the programme co-ordinator, spoke about the two-year pilot coming to an end, with an independent evaluation report to be delivered in June 2019. The work has touched one hundred Meetings, and has included training for eldership and listening to that which is needed locally for those Meetings. Participants had spoken of joyful experiences and fun in Meeting, making a great impression on those involved.

BYM Investments in occupied Palestine: an analysis of companies, mandated by the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) will be published in 2019, and will allow a more informed discussion. Basically, BYM should not invest in entities that profit from the occupation of Palestine.

BYM Strategic Priorities – Simplicity ‘a simple church supported by a simple charity’: the earnest desire to do good works has made our Society complex and its operations sometimes unwieldy. How can we untangle these threads of meaning and action?

There was some discussion of the fact that while Sufferings could ‘approve’, in a legal sense ‘we are not the decision-making body’. That falls to Trustees. Anne Ullathorne presented a paper on this issue. Another speaker re-iterated the need for trust between Sufferings and Trustees, as ‘we are all in this together on behalf of the Society’.

Diversity and inclusion in Meetings were addressed in the talk by Edwina Peart, inclusivity and diversity co-ordinator. Quaker meetings tend not to be diverse and we tend not to discuss it. To understand, we have to examine the current situation rather than ignoring it. Quakers may not have transcended the structural inequalities general in the UK. Considerations such as fear of change, class, sexual orientation, gender and age-range may mean that we are not welcoming others to our Meetings. Edwina plans to bring a written report to MfS in April 2019.

Circles of Support and Accountability - In July MfS learned that the National Probation Service was going to withdraw funding for Circles UK. Circles of Support and Accountability was originally a Quaker scheme in Canada. Then it was trialled in the UK with convicted sex offenders to give support when they left prison, in order to prevent re-offending. Protests led to Ministry of Justice officials taking another look at Circles’ funding. Ministry of Justice (MoJ) has two proposals

* extension of current funding until March 2019
* address longer term funding for providers

These proposals will be considered in the future, but there is reason to be cautiously optimistic. It is plain that the Government now realises that Circles of Support and Accountability play a useful role in avoiding re-offending.

Documents relating to recent MfS meetings, including Minutes, are at
 [www.quaker.org.uk/our-organisation/meeting-for-sufferings/papers-and-minutes](http://www.quaker.org.uk/our-organisation/meeting-for-sufferings/papers-and-minutes)