

Friargate Elders: report for 2016

Our life is love, and peace, and tenderness; and bearing one with another, and forgiving one another, and not laying accusations one against another; but praying one for another, and helping one another up with a tender hand. Isaac Penington, 1667

Being asked to serve as an elder is a powerful opportunity to extend our experience of our Quaker community and its spiritual life. It asks us to open ourselves up to and reflect upon the intangibles of Quaker worship and spirituality. Yet we can never look back at the year end and claim, 'we deepened worship this year and here is the evidence'; we can only be faithful to our intentions and efforts to facilitate this deepening.

We began 2016 by welcoming Sarah Allen & Danielle Palmour to this service. Our fellowship is essential support for each of us and we are conscious of remaining one short of our complement (11, not 12.) In addition, one of our number, Brenda Tyler has taken on the service of Sheriff's Lady since May, which has generally resulted in her absence from our meetings, despite her determination to remain a part of the group. In this capacity however, Jonathan and she have initiated and facilitated the laying of a wreath of white poppies at the war memorial in York on Remembrance Day. This is the first time this has happened in the city. Carol Robinson, who is giving valuable support as sheriff's chaplain, was also present, while Reuben Parker (the youngest person present) laid the Quaker wreath.

We are similarly pleased that members of our Meeting have been prominent in promoting the importance of the role of conscientious objectors in two world wars. (Stewarding at the Castle Museum exhibition on WW1 is another example of this witness.)

Our regular meetings begin with a space where we alternate one person sharing their spiritual journey, with the following month providing an opportunity for those who wish, to share significant 'news' of life events with the group. Regular agenda items include worship at Lamel Beeches, home meetings for worship for friends who cannot get to Meeting, Midweek Meeting, and practicalities in or around Sunday worship, from inner door-keeping to fire drills and seat layout. We consider vocal ministry and special meetings for worship. In 2016 these included funerals, and several happy events - three marriages, one of them the first same sex marriage in the Area Meeting, a baby welcoming and some deep, thought-provoking programmed all-age worship, for which we are grateful to our CYP team, as also for their work throughout the year. (Incidentally two Elders attended the safeguarding training organised for AM by Chris Holman. Policy and regulation are constantly changing and we all need to keep up to date on an issue which is important for us as a Quaker community.)

Arising from completion of the building work, we have chosen names for new rooms. This was an opportunity to bring in gender-balance for the Quakers

remembered and to create information boards about them, which we hope will interest room users.

We should like to increase the study groups in Meeting which provide an opportunity for spiritual growth and the deepening of our spiritual lives. The QFP group and the St John's Gospel group, meeting after worship, both began in 2016 and are continuing into next year. They function really well and the only disappointing feature is that numbers are small and overlapping, which means that a very large proportion of the Meeting is not involved. A questionnaire on the topic of study groups was sent to everyone in Meeting but the response rate was not high, so it was not as helpful as it might have been in eliciting members and attenders' needs and views on this subject. However, we aim to attract more participants in 2017 by offering a Quaker study pack and trying out new times and formats.

We were moved by Australian Judith Raftery's feedback on her experience of a month's visit to Friargate: She spoke of the meeting's 'generosity and graciousness' and the fact that 'you were prepared to trust me and share your time and insights with me in a way that I found very moving and inspirational. Two of the things that came across strongly in my conversations with you are how greatly you value the silence of your Meetings for Worship and how strongly you object to being told what to believe.' We would not wish to quarrel with that assessment!

We intend to have an Elders' photo board on display next year, as we have been asked to facilitate ways in which members and attenders at Friargate can get to know better those in the Meeting who serve them.

Finally, in order to enhance good communication and foster increased involvement by the Meeting generally in our activities as Elders, we should be happy to answer questions: for example about how to become involved in home meetings for worship, and we are always willing to listen to thoughts and reflections on vocal ministry that anyone in meeting may wish to share with us.

QFP reminds us that the spiritual life of the Meeting is the responsibility not just of those who are appointed Elders- but of the whole body of those who meet to worship together.

In this context we would like to acknowledge the many activities carried out by our members and attenders in this Meeting – one example of which has been offering hospitality to Syrian refugees which we know many in this Meeting have done in the past year- and this has been done quietly and modestly without any sort of fanfare. We are delighted to endorse these activities because we know that it is these quiet and unspoken acts of compassion which serve to strengthen and nourish the foundations of our Quaker spiritual community.)