

YORK AREA MEETING

Meeting for Sufferings Report

(2nd October 2021)

A Report for York AM by John Bourton on his attendance at Meeting For Sufferings (MfS) on Saturday 2nd October 2021.

PERSONAL BACKGROUND

This was my first time attending MfS since being appointed as Alternate to Representative Barbara Penny. QF&P Chapter 7 states that MfS: “... has a part to play in developing a visionary and prophetic role for the whole yearly meeting and in fostering communication throughout the yearly meeting.”

With barely a decade as a Quaker it is perhaps not surprising that finding my place in this august body is a most daunting, nay intimidating, challenge. But also exciting! I am fortunate to have benefited from Barbara’s experience and wise words and we have agreed that we will take it in turns at Meetings.

I received an electronic copy of a very extensive Handbook of Essential Information which answered most questions, and I was also able to attend an introductory meeting for new appointees in September via Zoom which was very helpful and reassuring.

And then the papers for my first meeting arrived, again by email. Wow! It took well over a week to read them all; taking it in bite sized chunks seemed to work best. And a good Zoom discussion with Barbara P helped me identify the key points.

BLENDED MEETING

After over a year of all-Zoom meetings this was their first Blended Meeting. Some 30 Friends were in Friends House together with the Clerks and a further 70 or more on Zoom. Many of us are struggling to make blended meetings work well in our own Local Meetings, largely due to problems with the technology. But there were no such problems for MfS despite the large numbers involved and the Clerks and technical support did a wonderful job. Though I did note that despite the split of 30:70 numbers in room to numbers on zoom, vocal contributions seemed nearer 70:30, with those in the room making many more vocal contributions despite having to get up and speak from one of the two microphones in the room. If you’re in the room, it seems likely that you feel more involved and part of the proceedings.

A couple of observations: It’s clear to me that MfS is some way from meeting its intention of including more younger Friends as representatives. And I was told that a full all-day face-to-face gathering of MfS costs some £9,000 in expenses, mostly for travel and accommodation, so for financial reasons, Zoom could be with us for the foreseeable future.

TRUSTEE REPORT

Communication was an underlying theme in much of the business of the meeting and so the Trustees had met online with MfS representatives prior to this meeting, and this was reported as being ‘open, engaged and productive’. Further meetings are planned.

Overall, trustees were more optimistic than they had been a year ago and were confident they would be able to achieve financial sustainability. Trustees were waiting to see if last year’s increase

in contributions would continue at that level. The Quiet Company (formerly Friends House Hospitality Company) would not break even this year but hoped to make a small contribution next year. The shortfall would be met from reserves. Clearly BYM continues to need substantial support from AMs.

SAFEGUARDING REPORT

The Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA) has made specific recommendations for faith organisations on policy, procedures, and training. Quakers had acknowledged incomplete record keeping which was being addressed with a new national database. AMs have been asked to consider adopting new model documents and report annually to BYM. Training is being considered in conjunction with Woodbrooke. **We were reminded that this is not simply a tick box exercise, and that safeguarding is a collective responsibility for us all and includes vulnerable adults as well as children.**

POLICE, CRIME, SENTENCING AND COURTS BILL

Surrey & Hampshire AM had submitted a minute of concern to MfS about this bill, currently going through Parliament. Friends were very concerned about the impact on freedom of assembly and expression, and the right to peaceful protest. The Bill also threatens to criminalise the way of life of Gypsies and Travellers. Paul Parker outlined the Quaker response to a wide-ranging bill which made it more difficult to oppose and Friends were working with other organisations to build resistance. He hoped that MfS would be able to help frame this opposition in faith terms to avoid seeming simply political. Paul Parker reminded us of Thomas Penny's Swarthmore Lecture on finding kinder ground and spoke of holding to Quaker principles while meeting with those who disagree where we can.

COP 26

It was reported that Quakers are undertaking a range of actions in the run up to COP 26 and a database has been created for Quakers to share information about any acts of witness they are undertaking. Quaker United Nations Office (QUNO) and Britain Yearly Meeting (BYM) have official observer status at COP 26 which means they will be working together inside the delegate-only 'blue zone'. MfS has asked staff to prepare a statement which would concentrate on the interconnections between inequality, conflict, and climate justice.

QUAKER CONCERN FOR THE ABOLITION OF TORTURE (Q-CAT)

This is a Quaker Recognised Body, and we received a report on its work, which is strongly supported by MfS. There is a personal cost to be borne by Q-CAT members and they are desperately short of enthusiastic local Friends who would be willing to join them. **Friends are asked to consider whether they can uphold and actively support Q-CAT in its important work to address this concern.**

YEARLY MEETING GATHERING (YMG)

There had been a several minutes at YMG immediately relevant to MfS:

1. Most concerned the laying down of the Quaker Stewardship Committee and MfS assuming responsibility for their work.
2. MfS was asked to monitor the Society's response to the key themes of YMG: climate justice; gender diversity; and anti-racism. MfS Arrangements Group will encourage Quaker Life and QPSW to report with examples of successful practice.
3. MfS was asked to consider its role and whether it needed to be reviewed. Paul Parker, Recording Clerk, had offered a paper on this subject. MfS is already reviewing YM and YMG and establishing a dedicated review group for this purpose; and is also overseeing the

revision of QF&P. So, there is a lot going on already, and he questioned whether MfS was the best place to review MfS. More time is needed to consider this item, possibly at the December meeting of MfS.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Although I did not make any vocal contributions, I did feel very much part of MfS and not simply an awed observer! The whole of the day's agenda, papers and minutes can be found in full at: <https://www.quaker.org.uk/our-organisation/meeting-for-sufferings/papers-and-minutes>.

Also The Friend of 8th and 15th October publishes excellent summaries. I have tried to be brief in this report knowing that more information is available for anyone who seeks it.

AM CONSULTATIVE GROUP

Barbara and I are keen to ensure that as York AM representatives we act as an effective conduit for information flowing to and from MfS. To this end we are inviting interested Friends to join with us in a small consultative group that might together consider papers in advance of the December MfS and assist us in addressing matters of concern to our AM. Please email either Barbara or me if you are interested in joining this group. Thank you

John Bourton
York AM Alternate Representative