

Report for Quaker Life Representative Council conference 11 to 13 October 2019

Prior to the commencement of the weekends all delegates received relevant literature consisting of the following pamphlets/booklets:

- Mental Health in our Meetings,
- The Friends Quarterly – Quakers and
- Mental Health and Encounters with mental distress.

The last of these is a book of people's stories along with a list of suggested activities using the stories in local meetings to develop our awareness and understanding of mental illness and how best we can support those who are living with mental distress.

Day 1 (Friday evening) we divided into 8 Home groups in which we discussed 'What am I bringing from my meeting in relation to mental health?'

Day 2 started with Quaker Life staff explaining the projects that they are involved in including:

1. Supporting Meetings to help encourage more Young People to attend, both existing members but also by attracting more Young People from outside the Quaker Community.
2. Providing support to Young Friends taking part in the Climate Strike
3. Putting on a 'Live in the Present' event for Young Friends.

They also told us about Quaker action that Young Friends are taking including white poppy bulb planting in Sheffield and running a stall on the Pride March day.

4. Supporting Young Friends who are parents.
5. Looking at transition periods in Quakers' lives and defining what support Individuals and Meetings might need to ensure continued engagement.

We then heard talks from 4 Friends reflecting on Mental Health issues and how these impact on their lives:

Firstly we heard from a Friend who has Autism. She described how her condition was viewed by others and explained that she was hidden away as a child by her parents. She talked, very movingly, of how, coming to Quakerism has given her love as well as a feeling of self-worth and confidence. She told us that she has found her spiritual home.

We then heard from a Friend who, as well as being a clinical psychologist working with children suffering from PTSD, lives with Depression herself. She explained how this impacts on her life personally and described how Quakerism, with its collaborative rather than competitive approach helps her to cope with her condition and with other challenges in life.

Next we heard from a Friend who, for much of her life, has and continues to provide support her mother who has bipolar disease. She explained the level of stress caused to her through worrying about her mum who has on several occasions tried to end her own life during down periods as well as supporting her during high periods when she can become manic. She has had to sort out huge debts built up by her mum during reckless spending sprees. She has had to give up work herself to give the support her mum needs and on top of this has to take a lot of verbal abuse from her when she is unwell. She explained that the love and support that she has received from Friends has been invaluable to her and help to keep her strong during low moments.

Finally a Friend who lives with Schizophrenia carried out some role play by interviewing a willing volunteer from her audience. This interview and how she recorded the interviewee's responses to her questions highlighted how easily one can be labelled especially in a professional health aspect. She talked about how labelling someone can take away any other aspects of them as a person apart from their mental health condition which can make individuals feel afraid although it can be positive in that it can help define the support that an individual may require. She told us that Quakerism has given her a 'toolkit' to help her deal with problems through its approach to sorting problems out peacefully rather than through aggression or the use of violence.

We also attended 2 workshops chosen from the following list:

- Self-care – living with anxiety – Tools that can help us cope with anxiety
- Playing the boundaries game – How meetings respond to mental health issues
- Snakes and Ladders – What things uplift and undermine our mental wellbeing
- Inclusion – Issues around diversity, inclusion and privilege
- Caring for the carers
- Experiment with Light – Meditation to help bring real concerns into the light
- Community Café – 12 lessons learned through running this community service for older people (The Retreat)
- Local development work and mental health – Idea share to identify future helpful support

During the lunch break there were further optional sessions including a discussion about Simplifying Meetings with Jonathan Carmichael in which he explained the work that he has done to date looking at how we can reduce the burden of work placed on Friends, primarily at Area meetings as well as looking at Possibilities and Permissions. To this end he was looking at the role of Area Trustees and Clerks as these roles seem to cause the greatest pressure. He explained that Area Meetings don't have to work in a rigid way, for example in London, the 7 Area Meetings are trying out a system of 1 cluster of 10 to 12 Trustees rather than the pre-existing 76 Trustees the region had. Also the possibility that Policies and Procedures could be adopted by all Meetings which they could then adapt as required, again cutting down on workloads.

Jonathan has also been looking at how we can manage our Meeting House business more effectively such as by introducing video call facilities for Business/Area meetings especially for people who have to travel a long way for meetings. He also suggested that Local Meetings could possibly include a video link in their Meetings for Worship to include those unable to physically attend.

With regard to the continuing use of Meeting Houses, Jonathan explained that premises could be rented to hold meetings especially where attendance numbers are low which puts the onus of running of the building on a very few individuals. He explained that that the only requirements for a Meeting are:

1. That the meeting is open to the public
2. That the Meeting venue is known and can be found by people
3. That the meeting be 'worth finding'
4. That the meeting is connected to its Area Meeting
5. That the meeting has a Clerk/Convenor
6. That the meeting holds Business meetings that meet the required standards

Saturday evening two entertaining and enlightening sessions were presented:

Movie Night – Inside Out – “Meet the Little Voices Inside your Head” (Oscar winning film 2006)

“Mental Elf” – Stand-up comedy on the theme of living with Anxiety and Autism followed by questions

On Sunday we had a plenary session in both our Home Group and as a whole group before Meeting for Worship.

Maggie Coxon – Quaker Life Rep Council Area Representative

16 October 2019