

HOW DOES THE TRUTH PROSPER AMONGST YOU? **Report on Cheltenham Local Meeting February 2009**

Introduction:

This report aims to summarise the spiritual health and the activities of Cheltenham Local Meeting. We have taken the opportunity offered by needing to compile this report for Area Meeting to work as a community to explore where we stand at present, what our strengths are, and which areas seem to need attention and perhaps development.

In preparation for Cheltenham Meeting's report on how the truth prospers amongst us a good number of Friends met together after Meeting for Worship on 29 November so that we could begin to explore our feelings and perceptions about what we appreciated about Cheltenham Quaker Meeting, and whether there were aspects of our community which might be different.

We adopted a simple model which looks at where we are now, and where we would like to be, and we began by exploring our positive feelings about our Meeting. Amongst the positive feelings expressed were:

- our Meetings for Worship can be inspirational
- the warmth of the welcome that we receive, particularly as newcomers
- a sense of community, of family
- moments of calm in an otherwise fairly frantic existence
- friendliness and acceptance
- respect for difference
- diversity + unity - a sense of "rightness"
- people feel comfortable to talk about spiritual matters
- sharing aspects of our spiritual lives
- a Quaker ethos which may help to change both views and behaviour
- the Testimonies
- that there is a process which ensures things get done (i.e. the notion of faithful servants)
- inclusion and equality
- the power of the Quaker business method

We then looked at areas of our corporate life where we were not entirely happy with the present situation, such

- how we might we engage more with younger people
- we need to concentrate more on worship and to consider the meaning of "Ministry". We need to remember Quaker style e.g. referring to "our friend" rather than to individuals
- we need more time for talking relatively informally about spiritual matters
- residential weekends and away days are welcomed, but we need to ensure that these inform what we then do as a community
- we need to examine the extent that we are prepared to embrace change
- we need to give more overt spiritual and practical support to activities such as those of the Peace Group

- more outreach is needed to make our presence in Cheltenham more obvious to people who might want to try us out.
- we are perhaps a bit too “nice”, and we need to inject more energy into our Quaker community

Obviously have not as yet had enough time to discuss all these points in any depth. But we were agreed on a fundamental reality – that worship, and Meeting for Worship is and must be central to everything we do. To have reaffirmed this basic Quaker principle makes the exercise valuable, even if nothing more comes of it. However, more is already developing from some of the ideas we expressed. We have arranged to publicise our Quaker presence regularly in the Gloucestershire Echo; we are beginning to organise a Quaker presence at Greenbelt Christian Arts Festival 2009 on each day of the festival; some of the issues with which we are not entirely comfortable will be incorporated in our Woodbrooke Weekend for further exploration.

CLERK'S REPORT

Attendance at Meetings for Worship for Business has always been excellent, usually in excess of 25 members and attenders. As Clerk I have felt upheld and supported by this level of commitment and concern, to the extent that I regard Business Meetings as a very important part of my own spiritual life. I have also been greatly supported by our Assistant Clerk.

It is appropriate here to record the deaths of three people who in their different ways, and at different times have been patterns and examples for our Meeting. Basil Sheldrick died in December 2008 at a great age, and we heard at his Memorial Meeting of the many ways in which he contributed to the life of Cheltenham Meeting. Wilma Carson, one of our Elders, died very suddenly early in January, to our great shock and sorrow. Her wisdom, and her deep spirituality will be something we treasure in our collective memory. She will be much missed. We are sad to report that Peter Hazell, a long-standing and influential Cheltenham Friend died on 28th January 2009

Philip Paull, who has been Local Meeting Treasurer for a very long time (and one of the people the Clerk has leaned on frequently for counsel and support) has finally laid down that office. We would wish to record here our thanks for all the work he has done on behalf of the Meeting.

ELDERS

Our main meetings for worship on Sunday mornings continue to be well supported, with the meeting room usually fairly full. We are often joined by new attenders, and Friends from other meetings. The meetings usually include some spoken ministry, and on many occasions are felt to be well gathered and spiritually very helpful. We continue to hold meetings for worship here on Thursdays from 12.30 to 1.00 pm, with a shared lunch on alternate weeks.

One of our elders has commented that the health of the meeting can in part be measured by the service given by friends to others - things get done, and one realises that someone has quietly got on with the job. This happens a great deal, and includes those who make it their business to hold regular meetings for worship with those who cannot now come to the meeting house, and those who attend the monthly meetings at Fairford air base.

We have been holding meetings for learning once a month after Sunday meeting, and are currently working through the Quaker testimonies. We have been very pleased that some have been led by friends who are not elders, but have a particular interest in the subject.

Once a year we try to get together for a study day or weekend away from Cheltenham. Last May we went for the second year to the PETT centre at Toddington run by our friend John Cross, where John and Diane Lampen from Woodbrooke led us. This May we are spending a weekend at Woodbooke, and are working on the programme at present.

We did not participate in Quaker week this September, but instead focused on the Greenbelt Christian Arts Festival at Cheltenham Racecourse over August bank holiday weekend. Two meetings for worship were held on different days, and about 80 people attended each day. A few were Quakers from other meetings, but many had not experienced Quaker worship before. We felt this was very worthwhile outreach, and expect to repeat it this year, probably increasing the number of meetings. We shall be seeking support from other friends in Gloucestershire. One attraction is that if you are helping to support the meeting, you get a free ticket for the day at the festival.

We are conscious that whatever good things may be done, we must always be open to new leadings. We need to avoid the notion that because something has always been done in a particular way, it cannot be changed - indeed that may be a good reason to try something different.

OVERSEERS

Our activities in the past year have included hosting several social events. We have held spring, summer and autumn suppers which have proved very popular and have enabled our meeting to engage socially in a more relaxed atmosphere. As overseers we have also been able to get to know people on our lists on a more personal level, and we feel this will encourage them to contact us as need arises.

Jo Teakle helped to organise an afternoon outing for some of our less active members, involving a short or long walk followed by a delicious tea.

A major task this year has been to reorganise the circulation of the monthly newsletter. This was necessary because the person who had done the job so efficiently for so long wished to relinquish it. So many people now use e-mail that it was felt they could download the newsletter for themselves, with an

e-mailed reminder. For the minority who do not have e-mail or prefer a paper copy, we still provide one, and any uncollected copies are sent out by post. To set up this arrangement every member and attender was contacted and chose one or the other method. We have made strenuous efforts to ensure no one was overlooked. After a few hiccups the new system seems to be working well.

We have of course been fulfilling our main function of befriending our fellow members and attenders and keeping in individual contact with all those in our care, as far as practicable. The majority of these we see at Meeting and have many a chat with them in the tea room.

However, there are so few of us that we now need an alternative to the system of allocating each member/attender to an overseer. We propose to suggest to Local Meeting that we contact all our fellow worshippers and ask them whether they want to be allocated a specific overseer or would prefer to contact any one of us as needed.

PREMISES COMMITTEE

We had the usual crop of minor items like leaking taps, blocked drains and toilets, together with replacement of one of the meeting room windows, tussling with neighbours who wished we would go away and taking 12 months to sort out the bureaucracy associated with removing a tree which had grown too big for its boots (or do I mean roots?). We have however overseen some expensive alterations to our premises which have been paid for by Area Meeting. In order of cost these are the rearrangement of our toilet facilities to improve the accessibility for people with disabilities, and for them too the improvement of access at the rear of the premises. We used part of a bequest made on behalf of David Mounsey to pay for the incorporation of a loop system into our existing infra-red hearing aid system.

Friends' Meeting House: Lettings

We continue to let the Meeting House to a variety of groups (around 20), including representatives of both Christian and other religious faiths (Seventh Day Adventists, Sufi, Jewish). Alcoholics Anonymous uses our premises for two groups, and other groups such as the Macular Disease Society, the Hard of Hearing Group and the Bereavement Group also use us regularly. The provision of full disabled facilities will enhance what we are able to offer.

NOMINATIONS COMMITTEE

As one of the larger Meetings, we are relatively fortunate when seeking to fill Area Meeting or Local Meeting roles and offices, and whilst in regard to most matters there is a great commitment to the notion of sharing the many tasks and responsibilities, we are conscious of the difficulties encountered from time to time in seeking nominations in regard to some of the more formal

appointments. We are also aware that a few (often older) Friends do shoulder a disproportionate number of roles and responsibilities. Nominations Committee feel that this is not so much that members of Meeting are unwilling to play their part in sharing the Meeting's tasks and responsibilities, but they are unduly put off by their perception of what may be involved. Nominations Committee have twice during the last Triennium endeavoured under the heading "Don't Hide your Light Under a Bushel" to encourage members of Meeting to be more adventurous when indicating their willingness to serve. Sadly, the response to this has to date been somewhat disappointing.

CHILDREN'S MEETING

After experiencing several years without children in the meeting, we are delighted to have three young children attending regularly with their mothers. Meeting for Worship has been enriched by their presence, and many people have said how being aware of the children in the meeting, has brought them great joy.

In 2008 we wrote a brief statement for the website and the newsletter to explain our current provision for children in our meeting:

Children are always welcome in our Sunday meetings for worship. If during the hour the parents feel it is appropriate, they can go with them to the children's room, where they will be joined by one of the Children's Meeting volunteers.

We are able to sustain this ongoing welcome, through the enthusiastic support of our seven volunteers. A monthly rota has been established, with back-up provided from members of the team.

The children's room has been re-thought and updated to meet the needs of our young children. This has included replacing the carpet, repositioning the pinboard, adding a whiteboard and the provision of a specially designed, easy to access book display unit.

Through playing together and becoming familiar with our volunteers, the children have settled into a happy fellowship, which we hope to build on in the coming years. We have informally begun to discuss the next steps in developing the children's meeting. We feel the children are ready for a simple structure to be introduced. To explore this further, it is hoped we can soon have a meeting that includes all the volunteers and both of the Mums. We will be referring to the Quaker resource materials: *Journeys in the Spirit*, for guidance in formulating an approach that meets our children's needs. There may be some resourcing implications, in which case we will need to approach the meeting for funds.

We have also discussed ways in which we could enable the mothers to have some opportunities to stay in the main Meeting for Worship. We will explore this further when we are all together. As the needs of the children grow and change, it may be thought helpful to arrange planning meetings on a more regular basis.

PEACE GROUP

The Peace Group, now 7 members, meets once a month on the first Wednesday. We take the Campaign Against the Arms Trade (CAAT) magazine and respond to its various campaigns. In Christian CND Ploughshare we find very useful articles that raise concerns we can take up.

Last year we supported and raised money with the help of Meeting for Quaker Peaceworkers for assistance in post Yugoslav countries. This year we hope to support QPSW appeal for one of several groups. Our preference would be for Peace Child International, but we would like the involvement of the whole Meeting.

We are at present supporting action for a projected Nuclear Weapons Convention and are getting involved in a QPSW and British American Security Information Council (BASIC) initiative to facilitate engagement between Friends and decision-makers on nuclear disarmament.

We also wish to engage with the newly formed Cheltenham Action for Peace.

BIBLE STUDY GROUP

The group was set up in Autumn 2007 and has met monthly since, with an average attendance of 7.

We have studied Paul's Epistle to the Romans and are now looking at some of the Old Testament prophets. Although we have encountered some difficult passages, our members seem to have felt the process generally stimulating and helpful.

Most of our sessions have been based on a simple process of reading and discussion, but we have also experimented with other techniques. Although our numbers are adequate for a lively meeting, we should welcome any new members at our sessions. These are usually held at 3 p.m. on the third Thursday of the month.

SEARCHERS

The Searchers group was re-started just over a year ago and we have had 12 meetings in that time.

Searching for what? The truth? I hope so. Can we report "Look, we have found it!" ? Perhaps not.

But I do believe that, through our varied discussions held in a spirit of mutual trust, each of us has had at least a glimpse of, or a temporary grasp of, some part of the Truth.

Our discussions are wide ranging, often far from the starting point, but always helpful to someone. The highlight of the year was our exploration of the Gospel of Thomas culminating in Hugh Ross (of Painswick Meeting) sharing with us his extensive study of these writings.

At the end of each meeting those attending decide on the topic for the next meeting. However we now want to give priority to any issue (world events, personal experience, recent MfW, etc) which is at the top of friends minds at the meeting start.

All friends are welcome at all or any meetings - no qualification or invitation is needed!

LIGHT GROUPS

At present the Meeting has two Light Groups. We follow a guided meditation that helps us to explore being in the Light. We then use worship sharing to compare our responses.

CONCLUSION

In our Report we have sought to give a reasonably accurate picture of our activities, our successes and our difficulties. Like most other Meetings in our Area, many f/Friends in Cheltenham are getting older and this is causing us a few problems, as you have seen. But we are very fortunate in having a warm, dry, accessible and comfortable Meeting House which makes it possible for as many f/Friends as possible to join us for Meeting. We need to make our presence in Cheltenham more obvious, and again steps are being taken to do this. A few of us are beginning to explore how to inject more energy into what we do, and into our spiritual life as a community, whilst at the same time managing any necessary changes in such a way as to minimise discomfort and unhappiness for other f/Friends.

I am proud to present this report.

Ann Caro

Clerk

7 February 2009