

**Introduction talk given by DIANA SANDY to Quakers in Yorkshire on Saturday 21 January 2017 to a session entitled Considering our Future.**

I'm not sure how this is going to turn out. I find myself quite confused at times.

Some Friends will know that I have been under concern in the Quaker sense for the Society of Friends in Britain for a long time – over 30 years, in fact. That is usually the nature of a Quaker concern – it doesn't go away.

Early on in the 1980's I began to feel uncertainties and felt that the Society of Friends that I was then working with in different ways as well as worshipping with was not the Society that I had grown up in. It took me quite a while to sort through my concerns and I discovered that I was not alone.

The main difference lay in the way the decision-making processes had been re structured in the 1960's.

I believe that the Society of Friends in Britain jumped off its founding rails in the 60s and has been trying to journey along its way on – in my view – the wrong track.

Let's go back to the beginning for a minute or two.

The system established by George Fox and Margaret Fell between 1666 and 1668 was designed to enable all genuine followers – and weed out the hangers on – to engage with the deliberations, discernments and decisions for each other. All Friends were seen to be equal in the eyes of the Lord. GF did not want to set up another religious/spiritual entity. He had resisted the notion of a separate religious body until it became clear that his teachings were leading to anarchy with many thousands of individuals calling themselves 'Quaker'.

GF and MF founded what I perceive to be a cobweb. An interlinking system of groups gathering for worship, sharing concerns and discernment. The prime reason for meeting initially was to see each other's faces. Local groups were to meet monthly and their regional gatherings were held quarterly. The agreed disciplines were determined by experience of the Holy Spirit, tested and modified as needed.

Thus Yorkshire Quarterly Meeting came into being in 1666/7 along with 17 other regional, mainly countywide groups. The Quarterly Meetings 'ran' the Society of Friends in Britain with communication between them and their constituent Monthly Meeting groups. Quarterly Meetings communicated by Friends 'travelling in the Ministry' in the early days. From day one the Quakers were noted for their itinerant nature. The 'cobweb' enabled concerns as well as various problems to be aired amongst all Friends and the right way forward to be discerned if needed.

There was no centre, no head office and no leaders. It has been referred to as 'Beyond Democracy' and beyond majority rule.

Annually, Friends gathered in London in part to see each others' faces but also to record by Minutes the deliberations and decisions that Friends had determined in the cobweb system of Quarterly meetings. My recollection of London Yearly Meeting in the 50's and early 60's was that it could be pretty dull!

This cobweb-like structure enabled the Society of the Friends of the Truth – God's Truth - to be very resilient. Cobwebs are noted for their ability to repel unwanted boarders. For 300 years the Society was able to adapt to surrounding pressures and influenced without being infected by them. The Society became one of the most influential bodies for its size in history.

Quarterly Meetings were laid down in 1966 -300 years to the day, perhaps, since their creation? There's a PhD degree in Quaker Studies waiting for someone to research that decision. My own very limited searches indicate that the Society of Friends of the Truth was not in unity.

It was agreed at the time that if friends wanted to continue to meet in their regions they Monthly Meetings could establish General Meetings. Yorkshire General Meeting thus came into being in 1966 and carried on meeting for conference, support for each other especially children and young people, outreach and work with enquirers and attenders. We continued with our responsibilities for the Schools, the Retreat and Breckenborough.

In 1986, we set up a review of our functioning so far and decided to invite the other GMs to join with us in looking to the future. We arranged a conference at Friargate for the clerks and assistant clerks of all the General Meetings and a few others. This was followed by two more events into the 90's. It was clear and stated in the Minutes that the GMs wanted a more proactive role in the deliberations and discernments of issues being brought before sufferings and the Yearly Meeting.

The General Meetings were laid down following recommendations from the group appointed by the YM to review its structures. Again this is odd because the General meetings existed courtesy of their constituent Monthly Meetings not the Yearly Meeting!

The cobweb was finally broken up together with its undoubted strength.

YGM became Quakers in Yorkshire in 2002 – I think. We did consider inviting other regional groups in the North to join us in a wider support group for our members but decided against that.

Quakers in Yorkshire could be the only Quaker group in Britain that has met quarterly now for 350 years.

So what of the future. We are one of only 8 regional groups and we know that at least 3 of them are struggling. As a regional group we still have strength but our numbers are dwindling especially amongst those with traditional Quaker experience. Once my generation has departed to that great Quaker Meeting in the sky the Society will have lost its final link with its past. Does that matter?

I would like us to find ways of looking both inwards – to our own number - and outwards – to the Society as a whole.

It is probable that some Friends who are attached to the larger Meetings in our region are unaware of the struggles that many individuals and smaller groups are facing. Some Meetings and individuals feel they need somewhere to turn. Once upon a time we had a Committee of Service to Yorkshire Friends – YFSC. Do we see a need for something similar now? In Beverley we have been trying to address issues raised by our increasing number of attenders and finding it difficult to give them real guidance since we are all searching and dealing with confusions. I would certainly not like to undertake that with the 5000 enquirers that David suggests we invite to join us.

We should look outwards to the vast majority of Friends in the country who have no one to turn to outside their own Local Meeting or Area Meeting. Where there are difficulties there are no backstops. Communications within the Society are one-way – top end down – and increasingly undertaken by IT rather than people. Travelling in the Ministry might be due for revival.

Why? Why has all this come about?

The Society of the Friends of Truth was established to enable all those convinced of the accessibility of the Divine with themselves to discern spiritual truth and speak it to the world. Concepts of Truth, Spirituality, Guidance and Holy Order have been and are constantly challenged. In today's world we are told that scientific truth is the real truth and all else is in the mind – psychological misdirection and that academia and intellect are the only ways to search.

So where does all that leave us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century – nearly 400 years after the birth of George Fox?

Some of you may recall Frank Parkinson – a Friend from Blackpool, I think. He spoke at a General Meeting some years ago. But in the 80s he wrote a series of articles in the Friend under the title 'Quakerism – the Fifth Wave'. His thesis was – is? – that at the turn of each century the Society of Friends in Britain has re-ordered itself to accommodate the changing world without being changed by it.

If we were to accept his thesis we would recognise that we are at the start of the Fifth Wave of Quakerism. How do we see our contribution to the future of George Fox and Margaret Fell's understanding of the Quaker vision?

At present we run the risk of fading away into the sands of time. But we could aim to get back on track, re-establish the cobweb and bring back into the world some of that radical spirituality that sent the whole enterprise off on its journey.

Diana Sandy

21 January 2017