

Quakers in Yorkshire – October 17th 2020

Notes on the Chaplaincy Session

Robin Fishwick explained that he has a diversity of roles in the university chaplaincy service, as a Quaker chaplain, as the coordinating chaplain and as a member of the Churches Higher Education Liaison Group (CHELG).

The University chaplains cover four of the Universities within Leeds, a total of approximately 100,000 people. The work is overseen by a chaplaincy trust, of which Quakers were co-founders. The chaplaincy is an ecumenical partnership covering a broad range of churches, operating as an independent trust, separate from, but recognised by, the Universities.

Robin started as a volunteer Quaker Chaplain, but in recent years has been undertaking a paid role as the coordinating chaplain, working alongside chaplain service managers and student outreach workers. Robin's role involves coordinating the team of the chaplains, regularly meeting with the lead chaplains to the four Universities (of which he himself is one), the chaplaincy managers and student workers. The chaplains also work closely with different partners in the Universities such as the student well-being team, accommodation providers, student unions, counselling services and individual academic departments as needed.

In the run up to the EU referendum and the death of Jo Cox, it became clear to the chaplaincy that they needed to do more to address the divisiveness that had been generated and consequent distress to students. This led to the setting up of Team Unity jointly with the Muslim Student Advisor at the University of Leeds. Other faith contacts, local or national (such as "Mychaplaincy" which supports Jewish staff and students) are also involved. The initiative has focussed on activities and events to bring together different groups within the Universities, to foster a sense of unity and to promote shared values such as introducing the Unity Pledge.

Robin's role as a specifically Quaker chaplain is three-fold, to provide a Quaker voice on the chaplaincy team, to provide opportunities for Quaker worship and to support Quaker students and staff. Much of the work of chaplains is to provide support with distinct features: an ease of access; a longer-term engagement; and bringing a breadth and depth of conversation that other support services cannot. As well as the pastoral support and enabling worship, the chaplaincy is there to provide faith-based expertise, spiritual accompaniment, promoting interfaith engagement and religious and ethical literacy

The regular Quaker meeting for worship held at the chaplaincy is called Breathe, as a way of making it non-sectarian and open to all. As a result, it attracts worshippers with a variety of spiritual backgrounds.

A copy of Robin's PowerPoint presentation will be placed on the QiY website.

Richard Levitt spoke of his experience as assistant Quaker Chaplain through the story of the young Franciscan told by Douglas Steere in his 1955 Swarthmoor Lecture, that preaching comes about through service. Richard drew parallels with the work of the chaplains, offering service rather than preaching.

Richard highlighted three things he felt that chaplains need:

1. Endurance - the sense of having been there and sticking at it because you don't know what effect you are having - sometimes the effects can take a long time to come.
2. Curiosity - why do people want to listen to me, why are they different? How can we be open and question those we interact with?
3. Need to be ready to ask for help from others, not trying to deliver a message.

Emma Roberts has spoken to us about her work as a Quaker prison minister (now termed Quaker Chaplain) and her new role as a paid Quaker Chaplain in the prison service.

Emma started visiting Leeds prison in 2005, working with the then chaplain and later taking over as the Quaker chaplain for a total of around seven years, but has recently started as the Quaker chaplain at Long Sutton Prison.

In Leeds she worked with the Anglican chaplain to arrange a weekly talk by speakers from a range of different faiths. Later she founded a group to provide a semi-structured worship, or contemplation, group. In addition, pastoral support of prisoners is an important part of prison chaplaincy.

Multi-faith working is integral to modern chaplaincy work in prisons. Emma's experience has been that she has been welcomed into the chaplaincy teams. The type and class of prison makes a big difference to the nature of the Quaker prison community, with lower security class prisons tending to have prisoners with shorter sentences and a higher turn-over of inmates. The higher security prisons have more stable populations and Long Sutton Prison now has a paid Quaker chaplain position because a group of prisoners registered as Quakers has formed there.

Emma was clear that Quaker chaplains are not there to fight the injustices of the prison system no matter how manifest. Working in the system can be frustrating and bureaucratic and requires great resilience on the part of volunteers and chaplains, at times maintaining patience and letting things unfold as they will is all that can be done. Emma spoke of prisons and prison chaplaincy centres as special, often strange, places, and despite the peculiar situation that some prisoners find themselves living their lives in, there can be tranquillity and peace. Emma spoke of a sense of being transformed by the experience of being a Quaker chaplain and the contact with the prisoners.

Ruth Corry has spoken to us about her experiences as a volunteer visitor to Askham Grange open women's prison. The team has been visiting for over 25 years, and for much of that time has worked with a Quaker prison chaplain, though no one is currently in post in this role. The team of five has carried on in the pattern that has been developed, led by the Leeds chaplain.

In the prison women are being helped towards their release - as it is an open prison, the women residents often have jobs outside the prison. The visitors run a craft group once a month, with materials given by the York meetings. Card-making is very popular with the prisoners, who can then send them to keep contact with family and loved ones.

The volunteers run “drop-in” sessions in the prison chapel - now renamed the “sanctuary” as a multi-faith space - for listening and conversation with the residents. The sessions, which sometimes follow Muslim prayer time, are an opportunity for interactions between residents and someone who is not staff. The sessions are sometimes concluded with a session of “Quaker stillness”.

Unfortunately, the need to keep both residents and visitors safe has resulted in the curtailment of visits since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Ruth spoke of the value she has found in this service learning about prisons and especially the distinctive experience of women in prison and the discrimination in sentencing often faced by women when convicted. She noted that of the prisoners in England Wales, only 4.6% are women.

Ruth has been impressed by the education and training activities available to the prisoners, as preparation for release.