

Minutes of a meeting of Quakers in Yorkshire

Held as a blended meeting at Sheffield Central FMH

on 22nd April 2023

A total of 36 Friends either registered in advance to attend our meeting or attended in person. We also welcome online visitors from Bristol AM and North Carolina.

1. Reading

In our opening worship we have heard read part of paragraph 24.35 from Quaker Faith & Practice.

2. Testimony

We have heard a testimony to the grace of God as shown in the life of our Friend, David Solloway of Skipton Local Meeting. We thank the Friends concerned for preparing it and add our endorsement.

3. Welcome

Our clerks have welcomed us to this, our second meeting of 2023, introduced our agenda to us, and reminded us of our processes for the conduct of our online meetings for Church Affairs.

It was noted that a co-clerk appointment is still to be made. We agree that for this meeting, we shall accept the kind offer from Chris Love to act as Co-Clerk today.

Sue Goodson welcomed us to Sheffield Central and dealt with housekeeping matters for today.

We appoint Sue Goodson and Paul Hunt to act as Elders for this meeting.

4. Report on the consequences of the breakdown in peace

We are conscious that peace and reconciliation, as in the theme of this session of QiY, has still to be agreed in Ukraine, fourteen months after Russian forces invaded. Many fled as refugees, leaving family behind, but others are trapped in their homeland. Today, we hold Ukraine and its people in our thoughts, but also remind ourselves that there are conflicts in other parts of the world, which cause people to flee either physical or economic hardship.

We are grateful to Roy Love for introducing this topic. Roy is a development economist with a special interest in issues of inequalities in the process of change, the economic causes of conflict and the associated creation of refugees who become vulnerable to human trafficking. He has academic and consulting experience in the Horn of Africa, Southern Africa, Nigeria and Guinea Bissau.

Roy gave us a little of his personal background in western Scotland where religion was a social issue. He has lived in Ethiopia and in Southern Africa where Friends were active during the Apartheid era. Roy Love asked us to consider that conflict, as a precursor of breakdown, needs to be understood fully for any peace process to be successful. Further, the process needs to be embarked upon with each side's full agreement.

Greed or Grievance are sometimes quoted as reasons for conflict but this simple response belies the often complex historical circumstances. Factors such as weak government following colonialism, competition between groups over natural resources, possibly exacerbated by climate change, and other tensions can escalate. Major regional conflicts often begin with minor events until one side may resolve to attack the other, notwithstanding attempts to negotiate.

From this context people flee, thus becoming asylum seekers and refugees. Other relevant factors are ongoing poverty, despite development, climate breakdown and a resort to using military force, which for some groups can be income generating. Conflict ends when one side concedes – but grievances could remain as in Germany after WW1 - or when each side accepts that it must end. It is here that intermediaries, who are trusted by each side, operate.

Thinking of this afternoon's programme, it is appropriate to note that children are particularly vulnerable to exploitation, especially when displaced. There are opportunities for trafficking from the residents of refugee camps. Many 'child soldiers' are recruited by militant groups for a large variety of tasks, especially when they feel they are losing. They are cheaper to accommodate, can physically engage in combat and are easily replaceable if they desert or die. Behind this, there is the question of how 'child' is socially defined in different cultures. Roy reminded us that in the UK young people can start applying to join the army before their 16th birthday. Organisations such as CRESST are essential in helping young people recognise the causes of conflict and ways to resolve it, thus avoiding further hurt, family breakdown and hardship.

Roy finished by outlining a number of steps for Quakers both at an individual and community level. His paper will be put on the QiY website.

We thank Roy for this introduction to our subject for the day.

We were joined by Paul FitzPatrick and Denise Cann from the Conversation Club in Doncaster, an organisation that supports refugees and asylum seekers in the area. Unfortunately, two of their group were prevented from attending today. Paul commented on the continuing lack of peace, unpeacefulness, for asylum seekers living in Doncaster. An Ethiopian refugee who had hoped to come today has been granted leave to stay which means that the system requires him to make very sudden decisions about his future: he needs to leave his present asylum accommodation and find somewhere else to live. Who speaks for refugees or those seeking asylum? How do we speak about asylum seekers?

How do we use language, for, about and to those in need? There are metaphors embedded in our language that might suggest a different set of values. Paul shared what some of those who attend the club had said to him. He feels we should not be using terms such as beneficiaries: the club is about mutuality and sharing. Asylum seekers have indicated how they avoid upsetting people, do not speak their own language in contexts in which it can be heard, and feel 'not good enough'. These comments reflect their feeling of a lowly status within our society. But some have said they feel that Doncaster is their town, that the meeting house is exactly as it is

described, all of which indicates that they appear to be beginning to rebuild their lives.

Welcome and solidarity are essential to make this happen. We must assert the value of what people bring; we should not make people seeking asylum dependent on the rest of us. So much of the public language such as 'invaders' is negative. Those who attend the Club are often highly skilled and cultured.

Paul closed his remarks by asking who supports whom? Did his appreciation of the difficulties faced by others and their qualities make him feel more human?

Denise shared some comments made by members of the Club. Not having a sense of belonging and living with persistent uncertainty were major feelings. Their lives are undermined and eroded by uncertainty, and questions abound such as how are their families getting on, or when will they get a decision?

Denise is the manager of the football club, a place where so many people can feel free after their earlier life experience. The participation is also an expression of achievement and the club is a place that reflects trust and where players can be at one with each other, and a place for love. Everyone starts with a clean sheet but they all bring gifts to the whole.

She recounted some of the frightening experiences they had had before coming to Doncaster, and how these sometimes influenced their reactions here. On a trip to Hathersage a helicopter flew overhead, causing one participant to drop to the ground, reminded of experiences of conflict. We heard of the experiences of one young man that demonstrated some of the horror that was endured prior to leaving his home.

Denise closed with a poem called Litany which ended with the writer's expression of love, and his feeling of getting beyond the otherness, into the 'we'.

This follows.

*To live my life
I risk my life.
To live my life
I leave life.
To live my life
I leave my love.*

*I am person
Full of love.
I am here
My loves are there.
There is love.*

*I am lie down.
They lie me down
Like animal, rape.
Cold like robot.
No love.*

*Men bring me
Beat me.*

*Hot water burn me.
Scars.
No love touch.*

*No eating
No drink
No bed
No human
No love.*

*I am here now.
Safe?
But they are there
Still. Still
Far away love.*

*Here I dream fear
Here I remember,
Mind shackled.
Alone, different.
No one love*

*Here safe
But emptiness
But missing
But longing
For love*

Paul finds offensive the latest policy of the government and wonders where the Home Secretaries, past or present, get their ideas from. An argument based on political or moral grounds gives a veneer of respectability and needs to be countered, an area in which Quakers can become involved.

Digby Swift joined us online and told us of the situation in Ethiopia where he has spent some time recently. Digby gave some key facts about the country, now with over 123 million inhabitants. Addis Ababa is built up and is the headquarters of the African Union. This contrasts with the rural areas where there is real poverty. There are restrictions on travel within the country at present. He commented on the situation in adjoining countries such as Somalia, Sudan and Djibouti and gave some history. The Tigray-dominated Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party was in power from 1991 - 2019 and the present prime minister, Abiy Ahmed, is from Oromia and has tried to bring the country together. There has been a lot of tension with Tigray. The quality of education provision has deteriorated over recent years, especially since Covid.

We are grateful for the contributions made by Roy Love, Denise Cann, Paul Fitzpatrick and Digby Swift and especially for their caring approaches to a continuing problem that should concern us all.

5. Racial Justice Group Update

Jo Baynham has spoken on behalf of the Racial Justice group, who are looking for someone and how we can help. There were some key characteristics quoted; a carpenter from the Middle East but did this match our perception of Jesus Christ? There were no results on Google, although there were some portraits of Jesus as a white person, and monetised white guys.

Is Google reliable enough: perhaps we need to look elsewhere? He talked about the picture of Jesus when he was young. Are they the same as we all experienced? We really need to change perceptions!

The presentation will be posted on the QiY website.

Ruth McTighe talked about Jesus being a brown-skinned refugee. She asked us to recall when we were children, and consider these questions.

When you were a child what image, if any, did you have of Jesus? If you had to describe Jesus now, what would you say? Would it be different? If so, in what way?

Ruth has given us some links for further information, which will also be posted on the QiY website. Also Race for Justice is a publication available at the Friends House bookshop.

We thank Jo and Ruth for this as well as all the members of the group.

6. Appointments and Releases

a. Thanks

We give thanks for the service of all those Friends whose appointments for Quakers in Yorkshire have been completed since our last meeting.

b. Releases

John Sweetman has asked to be released from service on the Mount School Committee with immediate effect. We agree to this request.

c. Appointments

(i) Our Nominations Committee has brought us the following nominations for service:

From 1st January 2023 until 31st December 2026:

Graham Ralph, York AM, to serve a second term of 4 years, as a Governor of Bootham School.

Catherine Woodbine (co-opted) to serve one further year, 1 January 2023 to 31 December 2023 as a Governor of Bootham School.

From 22nd April 2023 until 31st December 2025

Robin Bowles, Brighouse W Yorkshire AM, to serve on QiY Arrangements Committee.

These nominations being acceptable, the Friends are appointed accordingly.

(ii) Area Meeting nominations committees bring us the following nominations for service:

Stefan Lewicki, York AM, to serve on the Outreach Projects Committee from 1st January 2023 to 31 December 2025.

This nomination being acceptable, we appoint the Friend named accordingly.

We thank Friends for accepting nomination for service.

d. Nominations Required

Quakers in Yorkshire are still seeking a co-clerk to serve for 3 years from January 2023. Our Nominations Committee would welcome names brought forward for their consideration.

7. Conflict Resolution Education in Sheffield Schools Training (CRESST)

For our afternoon session we welcomed Véronique Pin-Fat and Heather Morgan from CRESST to share their experience of bringing peace to the everyday lives of school children and how this contrasted to those whose lives have been affected by the consequences of the breakdown of peace in their lives.

CRESST is a Sheffield organisation that arose from the local Quaker community in 1999 as a response to the issue of knife crime in Sheffield. The Development Education Centre had undertaken some peer mediation in a school in Sheffield, with encouraging results, and CRESST was established subsequently.

We were invited to define conflict. CRESST's definition is 'difference causing upset'. Conflict styles were identified by Thomas Kilmann and personified by the Shark, Turtle, Fox, Owl and Teddy. These styles and their characteristics will be shown on the QiY website.

Our particular responses are influenced by our upbringing but Friends drew attention to the dynamic nature of conflict and the particular contexts in which the conflict occurs. It was a useful exercise in making us consider our responses and share scenarios with others.

CRESST works very much on the OWL approach, which does not avoid conflict but encourages open discussion. In primary schools, at lunchtimes, two peer mediators are in the playground whom friends who have 'fallen out' will approach to help them resolve their differences.

In secondary schools there are conflict coaches, teenagers operating by themselves whom individual teenagers approach. This method respects their confidentiality.

We witnessed and subsequently discussed, an example where Véronique and Heather were peer mediators in a session with two Friends role playing eight-year-olds having a dispute over a ball. Ground rules are established, such as not interrupting while the other is speaking. Attentive listening to each other, inviting ideas about how to move forward and acting on these ideas are important steps. The key point is that the mediators are not present to 'fix' things but to help participants find solutions, and perhaps restore friendships.

The Quaker Peace at the Heart Project draws largely from the work of the Positive Peace in Schools Project (Prof Hilary Cremin and Roy Leighton). They call for a commitment to peace and focus on various approaches, some of which could have negative associations.

Training peer mediators incorporates an understanding of the meaning of impartiality, confidentiality and ownership. They are taught to ask open questions,

and to find win-win solutions. It is important to identify and remove blame-pointing language. Understanding how to listen is vitally important to the process and, in pairs, we undertook a listening exercise to practise our skills, which was more difficult to do well than we expected.

The work is most effective when a whole school participates. Training is for staff, lunchtime supervisors, and they are given handbooks. Trauma informed practice, with which some school staff are familiar, has helped to change attitudes within schools to take a restorative rather than a punitive approach to behaviour. Véronique related the strands of Peace at the Heart to the work of CRESST, in different situations and with indicated outcomes, in answering the question: 'Does the CRESST approach work?'

We were given some of the responses of those who had taken part in peer mediation in schools and the effect this had on them. Greystones School is quoted as one which had recently won an award for its practice over a long period of time. (A video about this will be distributed.) There is plenty of evidence that the intervention of CRESST does lower conflict in school. We heard of the experience at Carr Manor School in Leeds which has the most positive outcome to the process of Peace at the Heart. In total, since April 2022, over 1,300 pupils have been trained in 19 primary schools.

In a Rotherham School a member of staff reported that there was far better listening, people were being polite to each other and staff morale has improved hugely.

This has been a most stimulating, engaging session during which it has been useful for us to become aware of the various skills taught and practised and the positive outcomes the process brings for all parties.

We thank Véronique and Heather for sharing their experiences with us and encouraging us to take part in these activities today. Their slides will be put on the QiY website.

8. Thanks to Sheffield Central

We thank the Friends at Sheffield Central for their excellent hospitality and for the arrangements that made today a success.

9. Concluding Minute

There being no further business to be taken today, we conclude. We intend to meet again in person at Settle Meeting House on 15th July 2023, should nothing occur to prevent.



David Bunney & Chris Love

Co-Clerks - this time, Quakers in Yorkshire