

Navigating the River – Towards a Youth Strategy for Quakers in Yorkshire.

I have recently ridden most of the river Swale, from its sources in the hills near Ravenseat, to where it turns sharply south near Northallerton. Easterly by pedal stroke the rolling hills of North East Yorkshire fell into the low meadow lands between the Dales and the Moors. The Swale, like the parcours, was sometimes fast and dramatic and at others times slow and gentle. A waterfall and white water turning into an idling ripple with ducklings paddling about, within a few moments. On such a journey one is struck by the variety (or lack thereof) of amenity, some days a glorious sandwich on best china follows glorious sandwich, on other days nothing but a “closed” signs may be found. Oftentimes a rumbling hunger and a fleeting hope it’s possible to reach the next town before ‘sign flipping time’ make for uneasy travelling companions!

I wonder how much of a young person’s journey through Quakerism in Yorkshire is similar to my riding experience. Certainly across the seven area meetings Children’s work is more widely provisioned than youth work. Perhaps imagine the child as a rafter... the gentle stream of children’s meeting carries our kids through the landscape of early adolescence worshipfully and carefully, life jackets on and adults close at hand. At 11 years old the first white water comes, the transition between primary school and senior school brings with it new opportunities, new community, new variety and new challenges, the water is faster here, routes vary and for perhaps the first time our young paddler has some choices to make. *Am I too old for children’s meeting? What about Sunday morning sports? What happens when I sleep over at a friend’s on Saturday night?*

As the years proceed, the frequency of decision points increase, whilst the time available to make such decisions shortens. Attractive and diverting alternate paths abound – *Holiday School or Whitby folk festival, shopping and lunch in town or AM? Meeting for Worship or a lay in?*

In Yorkshire our youth residential programme is vital, the distances between meeting houses means **events must be of substance and length** to be attractive. We are very lucky indeed to have such strong offerings in Junior Holidays and Yorkshire Friends Holiday School. Both programmes are glorious sunny spots of gathering on the river, with slipways, pontoons, picnic benches and the great joy that is found in the gathering.

It is this gathering of young people and the friendship that grows in these times that keeps young people coming back to Quaker events. Indeed I would suggest that much the most important part of keeping a child or young person involved with Quakerism between 11 and 18 years old is providing environments for friendships to form and flourish. So much the better if those friendships are rooted in events and activities well soaked in Quaker values. George Fox and Elizabeth Fry proved beyond a doubt (in my mind at least) that friendship is a base unit of community and that friendship within orderly, worshipful structures can change the world. If we want a Quakerism that engages children and young people and that reaches into the future we must provide environments **with regularity** that allow young friends to know each other in the ways which are eternal.

Of our current provision then I worry that the section of river that connects our residential programme is overly long for our young paddlers. The nine months between September and June in the case of Junior Holidays and six months between August and February in the case of YFHS and Reunion leaves a lot of time and space for friendships to drift apart and for alternate forks in the stream to be chosen. I wonder also if routes to such events are mapped and sign-posted as well as they might be. Of this, the aims of an arising strategy are three-fold.

