

Spiritual Nurturance and Pastoral Care Weekend

24th – 26th November 2023

Report for East Cheshire Area Meeting 20.01.2024

Frances McCann, Stockport LM.

Over recent years I have undertaken various roles and responsibilities as a member of my local meeting. However, accepting a nomination to be an Elder felt to me like something different. There definitely appeared to be tasks and responsibilities that went with the role that might mean that being an Elder would be more in the (Quaker) public eye.

I sought out information about being an Elder in the Meeting House library and on the Quaker website, and I spoke with the other people with Elder roles at my meeting, but my sense of myself as an Elder felt quite invisible and insubstantial. I tend to find with Quakers that you “learn by doing”, however things seemed to be rather quiet on the “Eldership” front at my Local Meeting. In the first 10 months there appeared to me to be only one concern where a proactive collective intervention of Elders (and Pastoral Friends) was actively required.

I think that the first thing that going on the Spiritual Nurturance and Pastoral Care weekend gave to me was an appreciation that being an Elder is something that grows from within. I found that, through being in the company of 50+ Friends who were gathered together in body, mind and spirit to explore and celebrate their experience of the roles of Eldership and Pastoral Carer, I could allow myself to begin feel and think as an Elder.

The course was held at Swanick Christian Study Centre, near to Derby. There were about 50 participants who had travelled from places as far apart as Scotland and the Channel Isles. There were a team of 5 Friends from “Woodbrooke on the Road” facilitating the course. Throughout the weekend they cycled through the roles; as trainers, session Elder and course participants. The programme consisted of a range of activities and reflections, threaded through with quiet times of stillness and reflection. There were lots of opportunities to learn and share with each other, with the business of structured activities and the quiet supportive times of being together in our “home groups”.

I realised that the weekend was not about me learning how to be an Elder, but about how the roles of Eldership and Pastoral Carer are integral to the wellbeing of the individuals and community that is a Quaker meeting. I have begun to see that the prompting of when and how to step into the role comes from within me, with the guidance of the Spirit. One of the first things I read about the role of Elder is that it is often not so much about doing, but about listening and holding faith that the “right” words and actions will become apparent. I have found that, through having the opportunity to be immersed in the company of Friends concerned with the wellbeing of Quakers communities through the expression of these roles, I have begun to see the wisdom of this guidance.