

Report following Meeting for Sufferings (MfS) 2nd March 2024

Link for papers: <https://www.quaker.org.uk/our-organisation/meeting-for-sufferings/papers-and-minutes>.

Whether it has ever seemed so, there is certainly no risk of MfS seeming boring or routine these days. I'm intending here to give a flavour of the meeting by highlighting a few areas. Other items covered can be viewed in the minutes. I also encourage you to look at the relevant papers to the items highlighted in this report, to aid in understanding and in any further consideration. There is a clear account of proceedings in the 8th March edition of *The Friend*.

The morning agenda, had appeared in advance to be largely routine, but was not. We quickly accepted the proposal for an explanation of the use of the word "overseer" in Quaker Faith and Practice until wider changes can be made in the revised edition currently underway. We heard names of those who had been in court due to climate action demonstrations, to be held in the Light and added to the prison and court register. One of these was mentioned as in need of financial support as a result. However, the Trustees report produced much food for thought. It is those issues and those around restructuring which I have chosen to focus on here.

We heard that there has been a change round in Trustees with 4 Friends, including Alison Breadon of Frandley Meeting, finishing their terms of office at the end of 2023, and 3 new trustees, Ursula Fuller, Jo Hills and Kit King beginning their service. There are now 4 "younger Friends" serving as trustees, but still a vacancy for a further trustee, of whatever age. The clerk is now Marisa Johnson, the assistant clerk Danielle Walker-Palmour.

I found Marisa Johnson clear and open in her presentation. She talked about what it's like to be a trustee, stressing they were all serving as members of the Quaker community, and no different to other Friends, although they did have specific responsibilities for staff. Like other Friend role holders she said they're better when supported, endorsed and trusted. Unfortunately, she said, they were being mistrusted and misrepresented by some. She gave examples of a number of negative and hurtful comments which had been sent or posted via social media and described how, on being appointed, a new trustee was told by another Friend "don't go native". As a MfS rep over the past 3-4 years I've obviously been aware of, and felt, the tensions between Trustees and MfS over the way decisions and structural changes were made during and after the pandemic. Like others, I was unhappy with these, feeling insufficient opportunity for wider discernment had been given, in an attempt to introduce changes more quickly. I feel lessons have been, and are still being learned. However, I was deeply troubled to hear about the way trustees were apparently being demonised and seen as "other" by other Friends even if a small minority. We live in a wider social society where this is commonplace and where there are other common practices in communication, such as making broad unsubstantiated statements, which I feel could undermine truth and integrity if used. Careless use of social media is one, loose language another. Minor examples from our papers this time: "We have heard that Friends feel YM does this much better" suggests a widely held view but it could equally be only very few. Also reference to encouraging Friends who are the "kind of Friends not appointed as MfS

representatives” which suggests there are types or homogenous groups and some are more desirable than others, rather than concentrating on the skills needed or the aims to be met. This is not peculiar to MfS or to the business this time but participating in MfS made me reflect further on it and on our responsibilities to remind ourselves of Quaker processes where differing views are encouraged and listened too and conflict is dealt with through discernment together.

After an update on property and finances from Paul Whitehouse, BYM Treasurer, Marisa went on to talk about the “confidential minute” in the Trustee Minutes sent in advance of MfS. This was about the Quaker Socialist Society’s (QSS) plan for the Salter Lecture to be held during YM with Friend Paul Ingram and Jeremy Corbyn MP. A risk assessment had been carried out and it was felt that the lecture could attract media attention which might be a distraction from the wider work of the society. Marisa pointed out that Jeremy Corbyn had led the Labour Party at a time when there were complaints about anti-semitism and these not being dealt with. Hosting him at a Quaker event, it was feared could lead to accusations of not being serious about anti-semitism, could put BYM staff at risk and possibly undermine the 22 years of work which had gone into building up the Ecumenical Accompaniers Programme. Thus Trustees recommended to YM Agenda Committee that the event shouldn’t be held at Friends House during YM but held at a different time and place; the Committee will make the final decision. Marisa quoted Oscar Wilde “The truth is seldom pure and never simple” and followed it up with a quote from Matthew’s gospel “I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. So be as clever as snakes and as innocent as doves”.

The big business of the day, with the whole afternoon allocated to it, was receiving the reports of the Group to Review Yearly Meeting, Yearly Meeting Gatherings and Meeting for Sufferings (GRYYM) on the planning and delivery of Yearly Meeting (YM), Yearly Meeting Gathering (YMG) and MfS and secondly on the review of MfS, I’ll talk about first. Two minutes from AMs pertaining to the changes were moved to being read in the morning rather than at the end of afternoon to better inform the afternoon discernment.

In Keith’s report to AM last time he expressed reservations about the proposal for a rolling YM in session. In our preparation meeting for MfS we were in general agreement that the hoped for outcomes would not necessarily going to be achieved by the proposed changes and in accord with many concerns expressed in the Chilterns minute (p56-58 advance papers).

At MfS concerns about less time for discernment, the practical difficulties of organising young Friends involvement both through staffing and differing school calendars between countries, and of costs were all voiced and reported in more detail in *The Friend*. The report contained a useful table of risks involved in the changes and possible mitigating actions for these (p53-4 advance papers). One Friend ministered they could start now. This had been in my mind and when I later spoke I reiterated this and said how I felt these could be done and tried before embarking on structural change to see if it were necessary. I said I felt a lot of the desired outcomes were what we wanted for the Society as a whole and not just for MfS specifically. We appreciated the 3½ years hard work put in Friends working on the reports on our behalf, but that made me bring to mind and also include in ministry

a quote from the Trustees' minutes where auditors had listed points for consideration by Trustees. Although written with regard to finances I felt part was appropriate here: "Organisational culture. We may be too willing to accept assurances and be supportive, rather than probing and challenging. We need to work towards a better balance between these two necessary approaches."

There positive voices; staff in the children and young people's committee, YM Clerks, Friends who felt it would encourage more diversity and wider representation. It was noted that other YMs have already adopted this practice. Chiltern Friends felt the concerns in their minute had been answered. The minute was a long one and merits being read in full but the proposals were adopted and the report is to be sent to YM in July for discernment there.

Time spent on the stage 3 report was briefer as some parts had already been covered and a table (p44 advance papers) detailed the recommendations and to whom they should be forwarded which we accepted and agreed to forward the report to Agenda Committee, BYM Trustees, and Church Government Advisory Group.

There were two specific reminders to bring to Area Meeting and wider Friends. One was to ensure that the names of new representatives for the next Triennium have been forwarded to MfS. The other was from Lucy Parker, co-clerk of Central Nominations Committee who said how only 5% of Friends had filled informs detailing what skills and gifts they have that they would be willing to use for Quaker work whether that be an ongoing role or for a one-off event. She encouraged Friends to use the link to view and complete an appropriate form.

<https://quaker.org.uk/our-organisation/give-time>

Sally Mendham
MfS Representative