

Report of Meeting for Sufferings (MfS)
June 1st 2024

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

Looking at the papers in advance of MfS it looked as though it might feel almost routine, but was far from it. Discernment of Quaker Recognised Bodies gave much for us all to think about, we had a different Trustees' report to that sent out in advance, a fascinating account of Quakers in Britain's work in Israel and Palestine and interesting updates on Area Meeting (AM) Compliance and Safeguarding. Four AMs had been unable to send reps at all this time. I know many of you will have read the MfS reports in the first 2 June editions of *The Friend*. This report highlights aspects of the major business from my experience.

One routine item we seldom mention is appointments, but it will be of interest to Friends that Gill Alcock, of Frandley Meeting, was appointed to serve on Quaker Council for European Affairs for the next triennium, and I hope we will have a chance to hear more, first hand, about the work of QCEA.

I will mention 2 of the 4 **minutes received** from AMs:

1. South Wales AM regarding Ecocide: this was regarding the Environment & Sustainability Cluster (ESC) and its campaigning for an international crime of ecocide. S Wales Friends had affiliated to Stop Ecocide International and were involved with ESC who they were encouraging to consider working with other AMs and with international Friends through FWCC.
2. London West AM forwarded a minute containing minutes sent to them from London Young Adult Quaker Meeting that had discerned a response to the government's consultation on "Gender Questioning Children – non-statutory guidance for schools and colleges in England". The London West minute recognised this was a "complex and sensitive" matter and hoped the minutes from LYAQM could feed into discernment at YM and in other AMs.

The minute can be found at pp16-18 "*Agenda and papers in advance*" using the link at the top of the report.

Marriage Declaration Quaker Faith and Practice (QFP) review. After agreeing the change of pronouns in the marriage declaration we were reminded that consultation with AMs over the use of "with God's help" and "with divine assistance" in the declaration is ongoing with responses needed by October 2024.*

Quaker Recognised Bodies (QRB) QRBs are reviewed every 5years and it is usually "routine" business. This time Friends with Jewish Connections was re-registered and Friends of Hlekweni was laid down. However, for the 2nd time since I've been rep, concern was been expressed over a particular QRB and highlighted the lack of clear procedure for dealing with this. The **review of Quaker Concern Over Population(QCOP)** had been due to come to December MfS but was held over to allow questions raised by individual Friends at Young Friends General Meeting to be explored through 2 online meetings facilitated by

staff. We had received a background paper (*Papers in advance pp24-25*). Resolution had not been reached and it caused lengthy MfS discernment with a shuffle break in the middle. Some, including the YFs involved felt the organisation was racist and concentrating on the global south, others, including members of QCOP, felt there was concern for sustainability due to over-population and the effect on the lifestyle of women without access to family planning advice in countries across the globe. It was noted that even if there is no intent at racism it's important to take account of how it appears to others and consider how to respond to racist comments at events/meetings. The name of the group was seen as problematic by a number.

The minute reflected the diverse views and need for further work. QCOP was re-registered for 2 rather than 5 years, asked to review its name and consider management of potential racism at meetings and clarification of its aims. The minute also recognised the need to review how we deal with challenges to re-registration and asked Arrangements Group to organise 3-4 Friends to explore the issues ready for October MfS.

Trustees' Report Trustees had not met for MfW for business since our last meeting so we had no minutes in advance papers, instead had received a summary report with a suggestion that, in preparation for their next meeting they would welcome comment on what it is that we would like to receive from trustees about their work, that we do not already see, and whether there are experiences of reparation work at local and area meetings' level not already shared with the working group that may be helpful for them to know about.

However, when it came to MfS Marissa Johnson did not present the report sent out in advance. With Ellie Harding and Kit King, two young trustees, standing behind her in support, she told us that Trustees had decided to express their discomfort on the negative comments, online and in *The Friend*, around the issue of the Salter Lecture, which contained a great deal of misrepresentation and vilification of Trustees, describing it as "Trustee bashing". She thanked Sussex West who had sent a minute we'd received earlier, in support of their work and holding them in the Light. She reminded us that Truth and Integrity were the theme of YM and invited us to consider this and acknowledge the elephants in the room.

She clarified that Trustees did not veto or de-platform anything, or ban anyone from Quaker premises. They did not make any decisions on it. They received concerns from the staff, for whom they are responsible, and thought through possible risks involved in their areas of responsibility for volunteers, staff and programmes. As a result they came up with recommendations made to YM Agenda Committee who then offered a number of options to the Quaker Socialist Society, which they considered and made their own decisions and arrangements.

She felt there was still an almost constant undermining of trustees and talked of constant, personal, online negative comments. She talked of the language used and asked exactly what is the "Quaker establishment" referred to – staff? – Friends serving on committees? Who exactly are they? She asked we all consider the effect of careless talk its effect on

people, “they” is “us” .She read Ephesians 4.29-32 , which was included in the final minute. Trustees and others serving, she said, are only another Friend and that if others think things are not being done right they can offer their service. She asked: What about corporate responsibility? Discipleship? Do we uphold and support the processes we have chosen?

During discernment there a number of themes: a need for honesty and discussion, and a forum for it, when things don't feel right; that our structures still may not be fit for purpose and supporting this; we shouldn't be going to social media when we have agreed processes; we need to have full understanding and listen before commenting on issues; minutes need to be full and explanatory; we appoint F/friends to roles and need to support and trust them.

Quakers in Britain: our work in Palestine and Israel.

We received a paper (*please use the link above to read it in Papers in Advance pp28-39 as I can't do it justice in a couple of paragraphs*) which set out the current centrally managed work of BYM in Palestine and Israel – primarily through the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI). It also included recent minutes from Quaker Peace and Social Witness Central Committee (QPSWCC), Quaker Committee for Christian and Interfaith Relations (QCCIR) and Young Friends General Meeting (YFGM) on this topic. We were also given a PowerPoint presentation on the EAPPI programme by Stephanie Hunt and Claire Wood the slides from which I attach to this report. Stephanie clarified that Quakers hold a specific position on the Israeli Palestine Conflict but that EAPPI is managed by Quakers in Britain on behalf of different organisations and nations involved who are all active partners. It's not just UK and Ireland; EAPPI has officers in 25 different nations round the world and each has its own local partners all striving for a just end to conflict based on international law. IT's the largest organisation doing monitoring work in the West Bank but cannot get into Gaza as it's refused permits. It has underpinning principles of impartiality and commitment to peace, impartial witnesses, but is not impartial in areas of international law.

Gratitude was expressed for the work that is going on but acknowledgement of how dire the situation is, predominantly in Palestine, and how deep and complex the problems. A Friend from Central Yorks AM told us how they had heard from a 16 year old pupil at Ramallah School in the West Bank, who had been imprisoned, under house arrest and in legal proceedings for 1½ years without any decisions reached. We heard a poem he'd written containing the words *“I no longer pray for peace, I pray for miracles”*.

There was some ministry as to how we connect with other organisations in the use of terms like genocide and apartheid, the need to be clear how they're defined in international law and the positive and negative aspects of using them. We recognised the need to call out actions we feel strongly about and asked QPSWCC to reflect further on this in the hope that we might return to it at a future meeting. (*The full minute is available in follow up papers p8*)

AM Compliance. We received a minute from Quaker Life Central Committee (QLCC) which oversees an annual return from area and general meetings on compliance with various responsibilities required of charitable bodies. 11 out of 73 returns remain outstanding and the Recording Clerk is liaising directly with these meetings.

Some key findings from the returns are encouraging and some are a concern. I mention a few here that may be of interest to Friends in ECAM

- Six area or general meetings which are registered charities reported not submitting their Annual Report to their regulator within the deadline for their most recent financial year. Some delays may have been due to the Charity Commission's new online submission system, which took effect in 2023 and caused delays as trustees needed to register for it.
 - Excepted charities: 3 have yet to send BYM their annual report and 3 reported to BYM after the regulator deadline.
 - Twenty-one area meetings report having safeguarding concerns arise in 2023.
 - Roughly half of area meetings have a complaints policy, fire safety policy and code of conduct for employees and volunteers.
 - Roughly half of area meetings regularly consider their key risks and manage them using a risk register or similar system.
 - Two area meetings reported serious incidents to the Charity Commission or the Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator (OSCR) in 2023.
 - Eight area meetings noted concerns about record-keeping of key information, although a majority of these had plans to rectify which were in action.
- QLCC, through Quaker Life staff and local development workers, are asked to work with area meetings to improve areas of concern. *

Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) A MoU between the constituent charitable bodies of the Religious Society of Friends in Britain was agreed by MfS in October 2023 (MfS 2023 10 13). It has been circulated to area meetings and area meeting trustees are reminded to sign and return this document if they have not yet done so. *

Safeguarding BYM's safeguarding officer, Mark Mitchell, and Keith Walton, safeguarding co-ordinator in Kingston and Wandsworth AM, spoke on their work and service to help make our communities safe for children and adults at risk of abuse. They reinforced how safeguarding should be a priority in our meetings and a responsibility we all share. That Friends generally accept this is reflected in the fact that every area meeting has reviewed its safeguarding documents within the last three years.

We finished with closing worship including a reading from QF&P 3.30 and thanks to those Friends finishing their service. An interesting MfS.

Sally Mendham
MfS Rep

* *These items may need AM response if not already acted on*

Attached: EAPPI slide presentation