

QCCIR Interfaith Peacebuilding Day Conference September 26th 2015

This conference was held in “The Light” large meeting room at Friends House and indeed it was a beautiful light day. The first part of the day consisted of 2 speakers with question and answer sessions afterwards. The afternoon consisted of workshops followed by a summary and a short meeting for worship.

Dr Jane Clements, the Director of the Council of Christians and Jews was the first speaker on **Working with the Jewish community**. She gave us an overview of how the relationship between Christians and Jews has changed over the years, partly because of guilt leading to engagement after the Holocaust. She reminded us that this year is only the fiftieth anniversary of the Vatican’s Nostra Aetate, absolving Jews for the death of Jesus. There has been a growth in Jewish Christian relationships, reclamation of the Jewishness of Jesus both by Christians and Jews. She pointed out that Jews are very concerned about anti-Semitism and many feel insecure, but they responded very well to being asked to pray for persecuted Christians in Muslim countries.

Dr Jane Clements is also on the Forum for Israel and Palestine and is aware of the recent difficulties in the relationships between Quakers and Jews. She pointed out that there was diversity amongst Jewish communities (Jane recommended reading “Uncivil War” by Keith Kahn-Harris, see review <http://www.timesofisrael.com/uncivil-war-by-keith-kahn-harris/> which examines this diversity), and whilst some were responding to Quakers reaching out to them others were not prepared to listen and this was discouraging for Quakers. She invited Jewish people to share their perspectives, acknowledging that Israel is very precious to many and is perceived as insecure and fragile. The problem of Israelis and Palestinians not meeting one other leads to misconceptions. There is a giant chasm which needs to be overcome. Encounters are about personal relationships but Jews and Palestinians are trapped in their own narratives, so what is needed is an inclusive narrative. This could be very difficult as they believe that accepting the other’s narratives discredits their own. Israel is used in the U.K. for forging Jewish youth. We were fed only one narrative and I have now experienced the pain of the dichotomy of narratives myself.

Jane is often asked, “Why are Christians so concerned with Israel when there are so many other conflicts?” She thinks it is because Israel holds the roots of Christianity, often mentioned in Christian liturgy and idealised. She thinks that Christians can see possibilities for justice there but not in the other parts of the world.

CCJ hosts conversations where people can listen to one another about relating issues e.g. Zionism. It facilitates dialogues and encourages Israeli and Palestinian peace building organisations. Jewish and Palestinian students meet up at Corrymeela where they are made to realise that peacebuilding is a long and arduous process, which may not bear fruit within their lifetimes. I heard about CCJ’s Jewish and Christian combined study trips to Israel/Palestine which although enlightening, can be quite uncomfortable for both. I have contacted Jane as I’d be very keen to go on one.

The second speaker was Mashuda Shaikh, the Kirklees Community Heritage Officer, who had stepped in at the last minute to substitute for a speaker who couldn’t attend the conference. Mashuda also ran one of the workshops I went to i.e. “Building Peace in an Interfaith Setting”. I shall combine both in this report as they were very similar. Mashuda described herself as coming from a traditional Asian, Muslim background. However she was encouraged to get a good education. She runs projects which share the experiences of different cultures, mainly working with young people to increase awareness and build good

relations. She described her work with the “Six Million Project” which encouraged the collection of six million buttons, (one for each person who died in the Holocaust) for Holocaust Memorial day. This helped to build trust in Jewish communities, although she had to overcome mutual barriers between them and Muslim communities. She took risks like this to alleviate the rise in anti-Semitism and Islamophobia. She felt that the media don’t help and young people who are disaffected with their religious institutions see things only from their own perspectives. She tries to help them to see that this reflects their past heritage as they have no recognition of each other’s persecution histories. She also tries to tackle the problems of extremism. She is constantly dealing with issues relating to Islamophobia and anti-Semitism and wants to teach young people to be radical in a positive nonviolent way, especially when working on “Prevent” projects in schools. She explained though that she only started to wear her hijab to express solidarity after 9/11. Mashuda feels the Israel/Palestine conflict is a very confusing issue and will not say that one side or the other side is right when talking to young people. She believes that getting the balance right between communities needs grass roots work.

During the afternoon workshop, Mashuda and her co-worker, Keith Hargreaves, told us about their work with the Northern Friends Peace Board in Bolton. Keith and I remembered one another from when I’d worked with him in Bolton whilst running a community project teaching English to Asian women in the 70s and 80s. If you would like to know more about the NFPB project go to their website to download their report at <http://nfpb.org.uk/publications/reports-updates-newsletters>

The second workshop I attended was about the work done in Bishopsgate, London by St Ethelburga’s Centre for Reconciliation and Peace. It was led by Angharad Thain who now works there but used to work for QPSW. The church itself was destroyed by IRA bombing in 1993 and rebuilt as the Centre where work is being done on interfaith understanding. It is a safe place for dialogue where people can be open and honest with each other. She stressed the importance of listening, exercising non-judgement, recognising that people have a common humanity and need to speak for themselves rather than speaking as representatives of their own faiths. We need to accept that challenge and personal conflict is natural and part of human relationship but the power of doing things together is very important too. In pairs we looked at what challenges us about working with other faiths, e.g. lack of respect, stereotyping, evangelism.

Marigold Bentley QCCIR secretary and QPSW assistant secretary summed up at the end of the day. Her message was that Quakers had gone through several upheavals recently which led to some controversial decisions e.g. on same sex marriage, boycotting settlement products. Many Friends felt forced into positions they weren’t comfortable with but trust had been built. We are responsible for showing what our faith is about. It is acceptable to be radical but always nonviolent. We all can have a role in interfaith peacebuilding by being there, facilitating and empowering.

Finally we had a short Meeting for Worship with a little ministry. The last ministry spoke to me profoundly. Quakers can either be prophets or reconcilers but not both at the same time. Prophets may cause problems for reconcilers and reconcilers may cause problems for prophets but both are valid.

I was asked to keep this report as short as I could and I’ve tried to do so. Please feel free to contact me if you’d like to find out more as I have had to leave quite a bit out.

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