

Meeting for Sufferings 6 February 2016

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Report for Meeting of Friends in Wales at Glantwymyn Cemmas Road on 27.2.2016

It is interesting how different each meeting of Sufferings is in atmosphere. This was a quiet Meeting, with relatively little ministry, but it was by no means inert. The most “jack-in-the-box” item was that on sponsoring refugees, and this will be of particular relevance to us today, as it coincides with our speakers’ subject.

The other main items were some information about the events at Yearly Meeting in London in May; and an introduction and workshop entitled “Mind the Gap”, continuing Sufferings’ consideration of our current strategic document *Our Faith in the Future*; and a report from the BYM Sustainability Group.

The Minutes and all the papers are available on the new website at <http://www.quaker.org.uk/our-organisation/meeting-for-sufferings/papers-and-minutes>.

Incidentally, the old website will have been taken down by now.

Private Sponsorship of Refugees.

A request has been received recently that Britain Yearly Meeting join other organisations in supporting refugees through Private Sponsorship. This scheme may provide us with a suitable channel to express our concern, working alongside, for instance, Liberal and Reform Judaism and the Methodist Church, who have already registered their support for the scheme. Citizens UK is working through the National Refugee Welcome Board, a new organisation set up in response to the refugee crisis in Europe in summer 2015. The National Refugee Welcome Board is sometimes known simply as “Refugees Welcome”.

The National Refugee Welcome Board is setting up a new public register listing people, groups and institutions who have agreed in principle to support refugees in their communities. As this is an in principle decision, we are not being asked for funding or anything else at this point, but feedback was requested from Sufferings to assist Quaker Peace and Social Witness Central Committee in their imminent consideration of the request.

Quakers have a tradition of welcoming refugees to their homes. We heard from one Friend whose mother had been saved by the Kinder transport. Many Sufferings Representatives reported their own meeting’s strong sympathy, but also hesitations: could this be done by clusters of Local Meetings? Should we rather work with existing refugee support programmes? Who are Citizens UK and why are existing refugee networks largely not involved? Is the emphasis on Syrian Refugees at the expense of others such as Eritreans? Such heavy commitment (£12,000 a year for a single adult, up to £20,000 for a family) risks sapping funding from other essential work; the advice from people that already support refugees that interpretation is required almost full time.

The Minute expressed guarded support for the scheme, the need for much more detail; and that the underlying cause (chiefly, war) be addressed.

Yearly Meeting 27 - 29 May 2016 London

Deborah Rowlands as Yearly Meeting Clerk in 2016, told us that the theme is Living out our Faith - the ordinary as well as the extraordinary. We were asked “what have your Local Meeting and Area Meeting been doing?”, and this will come back to Sufferings in September. This year, we are asked to register that we will attend, and to encourage newcomers, those that have never attended, and to offer financial and other support.

Our Faith in the Future – mind the gap

This was introduced by Anne Ullathorne. We were reminded that Meeting for Sufferings is held “under the guidance of god.” We were asked to work in regional groups to identify what are the barriers that stop us becoming as we wish; “If you want to make god laugh, tell him your plans.” Are we listening or telling? If we listen and are led, it may be to where we least expect. This was the session that lit up, for me. One wonderful ministry said that there is a gap in the experience of listening to the will of god; and that balanced discernment comes not to individuals but to and through the community; it is not what we want as individuals but what is good for the larger group, hence the need for Area Meetings. Quakers have been springboards for change, but we need a vision of wider society. Discernment is not consensus of head or heart only, but also requires that we listen with another ear, see with another eye.

The Sustainability Group Report

I introduced this as the group’s clerk was prevented. The report is an assessment of how far we have engaged with our Commitment to become a Low-Carbon, Sustainable Community. It is a mix of good and bad news. One of the difficulties I identified was to know how to report it when some people are deeply engaged in sustainability, some are depressed and even despairing about it, others are worried by it but consider they already have enough commitments to deal with, and a few may still feel it’s not really a central Quaker issue. I talked first of the snow-ball effect of good things, referring to the exciting work going on by both Quakers and others, the different economic models rapidly gaining ground. I encouraged them to share this experience and these ideas so that we move further and faster ourselves by embedding sustainable thinking through all our processes; to think of sustainability as an inseparable part of ALL our testimonies, not *an extra commitment to fit in*; a sharper focus on what we already do, an added perception like night-sight binoculars. One new project of the Sustainability Group is *Nurturing our Sustainability Ministry*, a title that we hope to improve, to develop a shared story about our sustainability commitment and its base in *Quaker faith and practice*. The proposal includes organising a series of events in partnership with other Quaker committees and bodies, to support ministry from Friends ranging from theologians to musicians, and from poets to activists. Output might include publications, presentations, exhibitions, drama workshops and video clips of creative actions.

The gaps identified are 1) the still-patchy engagement, e.g. that only half of the AMs in BYM have appointed anyone to attend the forthcoming Sustainability Gathering at Swanwick, (18-10 March) while others will have several people coming, appointed by AM and LMs, and independently; 2) that some aspects of sustainability have still not found a “home” in Friends committee and staff structures, so that they are unresourced.