

(6) Report of the gathering at Woodbrooke looking at diversity and inclusion in the Society of Friends, 18th -20th January 2019.

“... Be patterns, be examples in all countries, places, islands, nations, wherever you may come, that your carriage and life may preach among all sorts of people, and to them: then you will come to walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in everyone.”

Dictated by George Fox in Launceston prison, 1656, Quaker faith and Practice 19:32

Racism within the Society of Friends is perhaps more damaging because it is unconscious and springs from stereotypical assumptions: “And no harm is meant by it. Harm may be done but it is never meant.”

Epistle of Black, white, Asian and mixed-heritage Friends 1991 QF&P 10:13

“And no harm is meant by it” not meant because it is not seen, it is invisible, it is invisible power.

What does it mean to be white? We should know because most British Quakers are white, but do we normally think about that question? What is whiteness? It is the invisible power that white people accept, and unconsciously use, in any situation where there are people of different colour.

Over the weekend a group of delightful, open minded, mostly white Friends, typical of most meetings, was constantly brought face to face with inequality. Inequality between races, inequality of opportunity for people who have questioned their gender, people of working class backgrounds. It was often uncomfortable, even painful, it was challenging.

As the second extract, above, says “no harm is meant by it” and therefore it is not appropriate to feel guilt about what has happened

in the past, but it is appropriate to mourn the way we have unconsciously acted. Now, today, we need to wake to what has been happening, to be aware. We need to repent, reform, rue what we have done, what we have allowed others to do on our behalf, the, often unconscious, inequality that we have allowed in our dealings with others. Answering that of God in everyone is showing respect to other children of God. Privilege is not something that is born to some and not others; everyone should be treated as privileged.

Our testimony to the world is that there is that of God in everyone, so we will not fight with outward weapons, we will not lie, we will not take more than our share of resource, and we will try to walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in everyone.

Edwina Peart, diversity and inclusion project co-coordinator at Friends House, and Mark Russ of Woodbrooke, led the weekend, ably supported by Elders and the Woodbrooke volunteers and staff. Edwina introduced the concept of intersectionality; where social strata do not exist separately from each other but are interwoven together. Thus the term “black” comes to mean black men and recognises that the forms of oppression experienced by white middle-class women were different from those experienced by black, poor, or disabled women.

Edwina is currently trying to establish a base line of where Quakers are now, with regard to diversity and inclusion through a simple survey, information about this can be found here:
<http://www.quaker.org.uk/blog/diversity-where-are-we-now>

Prof Robert Beckford introduced some idea of the history of racism. In the Middle Ages there were attempts to bring an academic approach to studying different human types by examining skulls, the study finding that the ideal was that of a young Caucasians woman, giving the word Caucasian a special historical relevance. A later study

decided that Anglo Saxons were the nearest to ideal with the Scots, Welsh and then Irish filling lower positions. A concept which fuelled hundreds of bar room jokes. Professor Beckford, who is a BAFTA winning media presenter as well as respected academic, told us about a situation in which he arrived to take up his chair at a University but was initially put to work peeling potatoes in the kitchens. Read more about Professor Beckford here: <https://www.canterbury.ac.uk/arts-and-humanities/school-of-humanities/religion-philosophy-and-ethics/research/jamaican-bible-remix.aspx>.

Sabah Choudrey <http://sabahchoudrey.com/about-2/> led the second session on the Saturday. This is what Sabah says about herself. “I am a magician. I’ve mastered the art of concealment, and everything you see is an illusion. What you see is not what you get. Some see a handsome gayboy, others see a pretty faced lez. What I am, is carefully constructed, to emphasise parts of me I feel that fit me, and hide other parts that I feel do not belong.” They are very clever in this regard. They have a full moustache and bushy eyebrows. They are small and slight, so the part of the illusion that I picked up was the first of the two above. They appear to work on this as a major part of life. The point that Sabah made very clearly is that our lives are not a debate. The pronouns, man/woman, boy/girl, these are not our concern, only they get to define; only they have the power to decide. For both Beckford and Choudrey our role is to be a gateway, never gatekeepers. We experienced comfort and discomfort: some would keep a gate at the point where someone who identifies as female gets access to women only spaces; here we were not in unity.

Rev. Lynne Cullens website:

<https://lynnecullens.com/about/> identifies herself as a working class, single mother. She is a vicar in the Church of England and made it clear that she is not informed about Quakers. Her talk was totally focused on the Anglican community and she was to leave it to us to decide if, what she has to say has relevance to our situation. Lyn is clearly very articulate, intelligent and informed. Her spirituality appears to be very much in line with her church. She has involved herself with organisations to further the well-being of people living in

estates. However, when she has applied for situations that she feels would be appropriate for her she has been passed over, as “Middle class men appoint men who seem like them.” But this was not an appeal against her misfortune but rather an indication of how her church was missing out on priests who could communicate as equals with their working class parishioners, being accepted as “someone like me” How much are Quakers missing out by not being in direct, respectful, loving conversation with working class people? How do we open ourselves to their energy, their experience, their spirituality? Is this a question that should be forefront in our minds as we consider the revision of Quaker Faith and Practice?

Throughout the weekend we constantly returned to the realisation that the way in which class, gender, race, physical or mental impairment create gateways are all just symptoms of the same malaise, the difficulty that people have in treating others with the respect, dignity, love that Jesus demanded of us, the need to answer that of God in everybody. If sin is falling short then we have all sinned, can we take such a realisation into the silence and hold it in the light? Can we forgive ourselves and change our attitudes, give up our undeserved invisible power, and gain the true power of community?

PH