

JOINT MEETING OF THE SOUTHERN MARCHES AND MID-WALES AREA MEETINGS

The Pales Saturday 12 June 2010

WHERE HAVE ALL OUR YOUNG FRIENDS GONE?

The context

Where indeed have they gone? We are all familiar with those children who come to children's meeting, then reach a certain age and disappear. Well, they don't all entirely disappear; some of them go to JYM and report back enthusiastically to Area Meeting afterwards. Some of them go to Young Friends' General Meeting. Some of them go to Quaker camps or other activities, but we never see them at meeting for worship. Why is this? Is it something about the way we weighty Quakers are doing things? This is our chance to find out what Young Friends are thinking.

What I have to say is not original. It is based on research done by Simon Best for a PhD in Quaker Studies. Simon works in the Children and Young People's section of Quaker Life in Friends House. The research draws on questionnaires and interviews with over 400 young Quakers and on his observation of Quaker events and activities. Kate and I have also made similar informal observations over the years. I have plagiarised Simon's research shamelessly. I have talked with him about it. It is in the public domain and he is anxious to receive comments and feedback.

Young Friends place a high degree of importance on their involvement in the Religious Society of Friends. 85% of those questioned stated that being involved in Quaker activities was either very important or quite important for them. Individuals gain a feeling of belonging through their involvement and significantly the majority of young Friends (58%) affiliate most closely with exclusively young Quaker groups:

- 38% go to regional summer events
- 10% go to Junior Yearly Meeting
- 10% attend Link Groups

A further 10% said that the Quaker group they felt they most belonged to was Britain Yearly Meeting, which many of them would have experienced through the programme for children and young people. Just over a quarter of Young Friends (27%) felt they most belonged to their local meeting and only 3% felt they most belonged to their area meeting.

The small numbers of Young Friends and the atmosphere of acceptance that is fostered at Quaker events for young people, mean that once Young Friends establish contacts, they develop and continue these friendships and stay in contact, meeting up outside of events. Friends and friendships are an important aspect of young Quaker identity. 66% stated that they had either a lot or some Quaker friends of their own age. 92% of those that had Quaker friends their age stated that these were close friendships. Kate and I can certainly vouch for this from the experience of our own family.

Young Friends' experience of worship

First of all a bit of sociology: for young Friends participating in communal worship at Quaker events is a means of binding individuals to the group. It creates a separate physical and psychological space in which the young Quaker group operates and in which Young Friends experience both a separation from the world and a sense of themselves as a distinctive worshipping community, separate from adult Quakers:

- [Quaker worship] is so different from modern life (Male 18).
- I enjoy Meeting for Worship at Holiday School because there is a real sense of community and belonging and unity in the silence (Female 17).
- At holiday school I felt like much more connected to people when I was sat in meeting ... cos like I went to meeting the other day to my normal meeting and although I know everybody there I

didn't feel as connected to them (Female 16).

- The silence is different in meeting for worship at Quaker events where you have been doing it for a least a day, because everybody is in 'Quaker mode' whereas with meeting everybody is coming in from outside (Female 15).

There are several distinctive features of Young Friends' worship, which are also important to them.

First it includes programmed and semi-programmed, as well as un-programmed worship. Silence remains the basis of worship, periods of worship begin and end with silence and programmed contributions are made out of the silence but it gives religious and spiritual value to contributions through speech, music, song and dance by making them an integral aspect of worship:

Secondly the setting is less formal than the adult group. Young Friends frequently sit in one large circle, often on the floor, without lines or rows and worship is usually closed by the whole group joining hands in a circle. This is also symbolic of community togetherness. This does occur in the adult group but not as often.

I believe in God....

The content of their beliefs is not important to young Friends. Believing in God is not necessarily part of being a young Friend. More young Friends believe in God than not (41% compared with 18%). There were 27 different descriptions of God identified. In decreasing order of popularity these were:

- Inward light – 50%
- Love – 48%
- Spirit – 40%
- A life force – 37%
- A being – 13%
- A father figure – 9%
- A mother figure – 3%

Young Friends' descriptions of God are closely related to the idea of 'that of God in everyone', but often the focus is not on God, but rather on that of 'good' in everyone, including one's self.

- I put much less [importance] on God and more on good in everyone (Female 18).
- It's as though it's the inside of you – it's not as though it's God, but just goodness – sometimes it just makes you want to be good and try and be a better person – so it's just inside you (Female 16).

Although belief is marginal for young Friends, they are very ready to talk about what they as individuals believe. This is quite different from adult Quakers.

Young Friends' attitudes and behaviour

Since belief is marginal, values have an increased importance and are a way of young people displaying their Quaker identity. For young Friends Quaker values inform a particular world view which influences individual's behaviour.

- It [Quakerism] affects how I act, think and believe (Male, 14)
- The Quaker testimonies are important to me, living by them (Female, 17).

Young Friends identify their values and world view as enlightened over that of other religions:

- We value things more than other young people – because [we are] more educated about people who have less' (From observations in the field).
- I try and live with the testimonies, I think I am less violent and more honest than most of my friends because of this (Male 15).

- A lot of people [young Quakers] are picked on for their beliefs. Other people want to pick on us because not only are we different but they know we're kind of like accepting and they don't understand it and they have to try and take us down to their level. I'm not saying that we're better than them but they try to make us feel small and awkward (Male 15).

Young Friends are different

Young Friends identify and perceive differences between themselves and other Quakers and between themselves and other young people. These differences are both inward and outward:

- You've got your alternative clothes and different ways in which you stand out rather than blend in but you've also got different views ... to do with sort of world issues and things like that and your views which aren't sort of thought of as the right view but can often be quite educated views (Male 17).
- At Quaker events I can find other young people with similar views to mine rather than always being the odd one out (Male 16).

Factors of difference, such as behaviour and appearance, are shared and affirmed, or at least accepted by the Quaker group. This is a group that is seen from the outside as religious but which exists in a young society where:

- People at school think religion and God are stupid (Male 15)

In one group of 30 young Friends that were interviewed by Simon Best, half of the group had been bullied because of their Quaker beliefs and values.

Where does this leave us all?

These differences lead to separations – both physical and psychological. Separation occurs particularly in relation to worship, with radical forms and settings for worship being popular with the young Quaker group

- I find a field in the sunshine much more conducive of spiritual thought than a cold meeting room (Female 18).
- The whole point of Quakerism was that we could worship where we wanted, when we wanted... Meetings do not need to be on a Sunday, and especially they do not need to occur in a meeting house (Male 17).

Although there is little shared practice, the demands of the adult group in terms of behaviour and practice extend to occasions when Young Friends are present. Significantly they also extend to the adult groups' judgment of young Quaker practice. A familiar example of this is the description of semi-programmed worship, which is common practice for young Friends, as 'alternative', so limiting it to infrequent times when adults are also present.

Quaker apartheid?

Just as adults separate themselves from them, so too do young Friends separate themselves from adults:

- I've kind of given up going to my local meeting because I think the average age is about seventy (Female 17).

Young Quakers identify differences in theology, practice and culture between themselves and the adult Quaker group.

- Older Quakers have their defined Quaker values that they believe in ... whereas I think lots of young Quakers are unsure whereabouts they are (Female 17).

- [We young Friends] are placing less value on going to meeting/God worshipping but [more on] just holding our own beliefs (From observations in the field).

Young Friends also see the adult Quaker group as being more 'worldly' and more like everyone else:

- Older Quakers have their defined Quaker values that they believe in but at the same time they've learnt to live in the world and they've got that balance. (Female, 18)
- [Adult Quakers] are not as easily identified outwardly – can't be put into a group [or] picked on (From observations in the field).
- Above all young people are a vital part of our worshipping communities today (Minute 9 from BYM 2004)

Young Quakers tend to affiliate with exclusively young Quaker groups. The young people's perspective of the cultural reality is of the two groups as being 'separate and different'.

Conclusion

Young Friends reinterpret and redefine the adult group's beliefs. For example young Friends have reinterpreted 'that of God in everyone' to be 'the light in us all' and subsequently redefined it as 'that of good in everyone'.

The theological and cultural differences between the two groups, that is Young Friends and adult Friends, remain publicly unacknowledged, and in some cases unidentified, by the adult group. To acknowledge these differences would require the adult Quaker group to acknowledge the Young Friends as a different group with distinctive values and practices.

The failure of the adult group to acknowledge the young group as a separate and different sect within the Society of Friends, together with the young group's sectarian attitude towards the adult Quaker group, results in it remaining hidden within the Society of Friends to all but its own members. It ensures its continuing cultural, institutional and theological marginalisation and its being a 'hidden sect'.

Young Quakers **are** Quakers, not by virtue of believing the same thing, or by behaving in the same way, but by **being** the same thing. They are part of a network of personal friendships with other young Quakers. They behave as Quakers in both Quaker time and non-Quaker time and the groups they belong to are distinctive groups of Quakers, which practice in different ways and gather in separate spaces from other Quakers.

So what do we have to ask ourselves?

- Does any of this matter to us in The Southern Marches and Mid-Wales Area Meetings? If so, how?
- What can we do to make young Friends feel more welcome and at home in our meetings?
- Should we sometimes change our way of worship?
- Should we do anything at all?

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June 2010