

REPORT ON IRELAND YEARLY MEETING, 31ST MARCH - 3RD APRIL 2016

Who is My Neighbour?

Ireland Yearly Meeting this year challenged Friends to consider the question “Who is my neighbour?” The quotation from Quaker Life and Practice which underpinned the theme further probed participants - *“How can we, such a small insignificant group of people as the Society of Friends help to stem the tide of evil and hate, and greed and fear that is so wide-spread in the world today?”* (C Winifred Lamb, c.1954, QL&P 4.13). Such a topical theme was very welcome, and it was addressed throughout the three days in the business sessions, interest groups and public lecture. For the first time, we were invited by the website editor to ‘share, like, post and comment’ about Yearly Meeting on social media, with Quakers in Ireland producing updates on Twitter and Facebook throughout the event.

Kings Hospital School in Dublin is a familiar venue for a lot of Irish Friends, and it was good to be joined by other Friends from further afield in Britain and Europe, and some representatives from local churches. This year we also shared the facilities for a couple of days (but sadly not the big fried breakfasts) with the Ireland and England under 18 rugby teams. Ireland eventually emerged victorious from the final match, while we as a Yearly Meeting were dealing with the issue of conflict in a more peaceable way.

Marisa Johnson, Executive Secretary of the Europe and Middle East section of FWCC, presented the Ministry and Oversight session on the first evening with the intriguing title ‘The Gift of Conflict’. Traditional reactions to conflict are avoidance, discomfort and a desire for swift resolution, but Marisa encouraged us to view it differently. Conflict can lead to a release of creative energy, and this is the very life force. Conflict also only exists where there is a relationship between people, who are responding to something they care deeply about. We were reminded that a lot of Gospel literature was written in response to conflict within communities. Paul’s letters in particular encourage people to remain connected and live in harmony with one another. Faith-based reactions mean acknowledging conflict openly, and welcoming the diversity that has led to it. Be thankful for the depth of feeling behind the conflict and seek out the truth that is laid bare. Then make time for further exploration of the issues, and don’t strive to resolve things too quickly. Be compassionate and humble, and avail of God’s help through prayer. FWCC exists to bring Friends of all traditions together. We must use these safe opportunities for consultation to explore the tensions within our Quaker family before we can handle conflicts in the wider world.

Bible study on Friday morning centred on the parable of the Good Samaritan which provides us with the answer that Jesus gave when he was asked “And who is my neighbour?”. In the business sessions that day the input from the Peace committee and Quaker Service helped point Friends to areas where people are in need and where we can put our faith into action. We need to think of new and innovative ways to reach out to our neighbours. Quaker Connections offers volunteers the opportunity to visit and support isolated prisoners, and Quaker Service helps mothers to turn their lives round through a year long intensive programme, with ongoing help afterwards. There is also a programme especially for teenagers, and Quaker Service is also involved with the all Ireland Restorative Justice Forum, pushing to see restorative practices at all levels of society. Friends are encouraged to contribute in whatever way they can, either financially, by volunteering or by donating items or purchasing from Quaker Care. We were reminded of the quote by Helen Keller *“There is no better way to thank God for your sight than by giving a helping hand to someone in the dark”*.

Other sessions updated us on Yearly Meeting finance and statistics, and what is the role of Quakers in education. Friends School in Lisburn continues to have a strong Quaker ethos which emphasises the acceptance of difference, and values the contribution of every child.

In between sessions, there were many opportunities for fellowship. Friends were able to purchase books at the book stall, buy bargains from the Irish Quaker Faith in Action stall, learn about the activities of Foinse Research, Eco Quakers Ireland and order an English language version of a new Dutch Quaker "comic book." The chat at meal times was lively. Volunteers were encouraged to help too - at reception, collecting in the meal tickets, serving tea and coffee, or on the door and microphone duty. Every day finished with epilogue, with Friends gathering quietly by candlelight.

The public lecture on Friday evening continued the theme, and was given by Will Haire of South Belfast Meeting. The title was *Who is my Neighbour? What is our Testimony on Inclusion?* Will spent his career working in Government, - in Northern Ireland, London and Brussels, and his focus as a civil servant was on how Government can help produce social stability and inclusion through economic and social policy. Currently Will is a Trustee of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, and he spoke about the challenges of living out our faith in an advanced capitalist society. How can we ensure that everyone may have life and live it to the full as Christ wished. The focus must be on equality and social justice, and on looking at the reasons for poverty and finding answers. Legislation itself cannot prevent problems, but we need to drive for change with 'unreasonable optimism' and be a neighbour to anyone who needs us.

Andrew Lane, from the Quaker Council for European Affairs, spoke on '*Who is my Neighbour in Europe?*' Our faith is a simple faith in a complicated world, and our response is about having Quakers in the right places to address local as well as global problems. It is important for Quakers to have a presence in Brussels right at the centre of European institutions. Each Yearly Meeting appoints one person to QCEA, and together those Friends discern what issues to work on, trying to bring the value of the individual into policy. Current issues include humanitarian visas for refugees, restorative justice for hate crime, and the arms trade. The recent terrorist explosion in Brussels at the underground station took place very close to Quaker House. Andrew spoke about how peace activists responded early to lead the way, and thus minimised publicity for the far right groups.

The recent concern of a Dublin Friend led to the setting up of a Welcoming Refugees Group, in response to the plight of refugees who end up in Direct Provision Centres. Only about 10% of refugees are accepted on their first asylum application, and the others are housed in the centres, sometimes for years, with no chance to work and only a tiny allowance to live on. Four thousand people are currently in these centres, one third of them children, and nothing is on offer in the way of language teaching or orientation to Irish culture. Problems with alcohol dependence and aggression are common, and the attempted suicide rate is higher than average. Dublin Friends urged us to get involved, and raise awareness of the problems for refugees.

We also had a vivid account of the current refugee situation in Germany, from Lutz Caspers. He told us about the 'welcome culture' instigated by Angela Merkel, and how many Germans still remember what it means to be a refugee. Therefore there is more willingness to help others in the same situation. Lutz has refugee neighbours in his small

village who he has got to know, and while there are many problems with integration in Germany, large numbers of refugees have been able to successfully start a new life.

The second session on Saturday morning focused on the work of Irish Quaker Faith in Action, and in particular the issue of homelessness. IQFA supports a wide range of projects at home and abroad, and we heard in more detail about one of these schemes. Friends have set up a service in the Dún Laoghaire / Deans Grange area of Dublin to support homeless people every Monday night. IQFA money has enabled the group to link in with the Tiglin outreach service and operate from a special bus to provide food, support and other services to those who are homeless or have addiction problems. Homeless people in another area were helped by Young Friends. The IYM Youth Coordinator, Carolyn McMullan, took a group of ten young people on a pilgrimage to The United States in the summer, where they worked with homeless people across a whole range of projects in New York, Pennsylvania and North Carolina.

The third of the speakers on the issue of homeless people was Fr Peter McVerry SJ from the Peter McVerry Trust. He spoke about how homelessness is a growing problem in every country as governments have abdicated their responsibility for providing social housing. Housing has become a commodity to be bought and sold for profit, and houses are left empty by investors waiting for the market to improve while many people have nowhere to call home. Low income families have to depend on the private sector but demand here far exceeds supply. The alternative bed and breakfast accommodation does not allow for cooking or laundry facilities, and is often far from where children go to school. Homelessness can easily lead to hopelessness. People leaving prison or young people leaving the care system are particularly vulnerable, and every repossession of a property by banks and financial institutions is potentially a family on the street. The problem must be solved at a political level. The McVerry Trust tries to treat homeless people with respect and the hostels they own are deliberately designed to be as nice as possible. Peter's advice was to treat those on the street with dignity. Say hello to them, show an interest and ask them what they would like rather than just buying them a sandwich. Those people on the street who ask for money are not stealing. There are other more political actions we can take to try to change the culture. The Yearly Meeting decided to express its concern publicly in a statement addressed to the authorities in both jurisdictions of Ireland, urging them to take urgent action to tackle the underlying causes of homelessness.

As well as the various sessions on the theme, Yearly Meeting allowed time for a bit of fun. A table quiz on Saturday evening proved very competitive, with teams battling through the rounds to try and get top place.

The three representatives who went to the FWCC Plenary Meeting in Peru were given the chance to report back on their experiences there, and the Yearly Meeting agreed to answer the FWCC call to initiate two concrete actions on sustainability by January 2017. Each Preparative Meeting is asked to develop a sustainability plan before the end of the year, taking into consideration factors such as accessibility by public transport, energy efficiency, use of Fairtrade tea and coffee and use of organic and locally sourced food, when possible. IYM will take the same factors into account when planning the next Yearly Meeting.

A commitment was also made to develop an investment strategy by January 2017 to ethically invest all funds within Yearly Meeting in sustainable and peaceful companies, and to divest from destructive industries, including fossil fuels.

There was time for reports from Young Friends, and lots of interest in what types of youth activities are taking place.

On Friday and Saturday there was a choice of interest groups to attend each afternoon. The topics included Basic Income, Getting the most out of our Committee System, and Breathing the Psalms. There was also a chance to meet the Public Lecturer, find out about the Quaker view of the UN Climate Summit, and an opportunity to share experiences about what part the Holy Spirit plays in our lives.

All in all, it was a packed schedule, with much to take back to our home Meetings, and think about over the coming months.

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