

NORTHUMBRIA AREA MEETING

CHANGING OUR WAYS – REVITALISING AREA MEETING

Northumbria Area Meeting

Northumbria Area Meeting comprises eight Local Meetings. Newcastle, Alnwick, Monkseaton, Sunderland, Durham, Allendale, Hexham, Stocksfield. Newcastle is the oldest, dating from the 1670s and Hexham the newest, dating from the 1990s. Our last Tabular Statement recorded 257 members, 134 Attenders, a total of 391. Newcastle, the biggest, accounts for 38% and Allendale, the smallest, 2%.

In 2014 we are a different Area Meeting from what we were a year or two ago – why have we changed, how did we do it and what exactly do we do that might be different?

Before we began the process of change we were much like other Area Meetings. We met as a Monthly Meeting eight times a year moving from Meeting to Meeting. We dealt with the full range of Area Meeting responsibilities as described in Quaker Faith and Practice. It's quite a list! We met on Saturday afternoons, with occasional morning sessions on a Quaker theme or hosting a visiting speaker. And the Friends who attended were the hardy perennials, the stalwarts. Friends who saw Area Meeting as a responsibility of being a member, but also enjoyed the opportunity to greet old friends and “... to see each other's' faces ...”. We rarely saw new faces. We rarely saw children. And the business quite often was prolonged and difficult. But the business was done, and done in good, sound Gospel Order - we were, and are a disciplined Area Meeting.

The Process of Change

The process of change began with a concern raised at Area Meeting from Alnwick LM. Alnwick Friends, a small Meeting, felt geographically isolated and wanted to be a bigger part of the Area Meeting. Alnwick Friends sensed that Area Meeting was focussed too much on its business and not enough on raising the spirits of Friends. Alnwick Friends believed that the Area Meeting could or should address the strategic challenges expressed for the Society in Yearly Meeting's Framework for the Future 2009/2014.

The need for change was consolidated by messages brought back by our representatives to Meeting for Sufferings in 2011. Sufferings wished to communicate better with Area Meetings and to give greater support to Area Meetings, knowing that many Area Meetings were having difficulties in attracting Friends to their Meetings and the spirit was drowning in the business.

These two significant prompts echoed a sense within Area Meeting that our spiritual lives could be enriched and our business made more effective if we could find a more sympathetic way of managing our Area Meeting responsibilities. We also realised that Quaker Faith & Practice is not prescriptive about the shape or format of an Area Meeting. It does describe the Area Meeting responsibilities, but does not guide Area Meetings on how they might be discharged. There is no quorum for an Area Business Meeting ... “quorum” is not in the Quaker lexicon, or in Quaker Faith and Practice.

During 2011 Area Meeting managed a wide consultation with its Local Meetings. We outlined Alnwick LM's concerns. We described Meeting for Sufferings' concerns. We asked each Local Meeting to hold conversations about the need for change and to offer to Area Meeting suggestions as to how matters might be improved. The consultation bore fruit. Local Meetings responded positively with commentary and ideas for the future. At Area Meeting in January 2012 we were able to look at six clear proposals for change and from that Area Meeting, with just a few gentle,

Quakerly tweaks along the way we have Northumbria Area Meeting as it is practised today.

Six features of the Northumbrian Way

1. Area Meetings are held on Sundays

A simple change. But with a surprising outcome. Quieter journeys to Area Meeting. A perceptive peacefulness which leads one through the day. And Sunday Area Meeting releases Saturdays for family stuff and the parking battles with Saturday shoppers. Friends are in the habit of being God and Quaker centred on First Day. It also enables Friends to join the host Local Meeting in its Sunday Meeting for Worship. This can re-energise Friends in small meetings.

2. Area Meeting meets four times a year ... not eight.

3. Local Meeting Partnerships

Eight Local Meetings are paired with a neighbouring Local Meeting to form four partnerships. This spreads the challenge of arranging the Area Meeting. Local Meetings have the opportunity to host an Area Meeting every two years – a welcome lessening of the not insignificant burden on small Meetings of being hospitable to Area Meeting once a year as previously.

4. The Alnwick Model Area Meeting

The Alnwick Model for Area Meeting on the Sunday was adopted. Its key features?

- Overnight accommodation is offered to enable Friends to join the Area Meeting hosts in morning worship. Other Friends are also encouraged to join morning Meeting for Worship.
- Following Worship from 10.00am, a short refreshment break. A presentation, exhibition or speaker. Shared lunch. A spiritual exercise to put the Friends in a frame of mind to approach important matters.
- A smaller and shorter Area Business Meeting - that is, from 2.00 pm in the afternoon.
- A big and inclusive welcome for children and children's events.

5. Area Meeting Working Group

The most significant change, perhaps, has been the creation of an Area Meeting Working Group. A term borrowed from town and parish council practice. Its key task is to absorb as much of the routine business away from the day set aside for getting to know each other as Friends, friends and as spiritual adventurers.

To understand the idea of the Working Group we have agreed **Terms of Reference** for the Working Group. See attached paper, *Table of Responsibilities and Working Group Terms of Reference*. Working Group aims to progress routine items of business and to assess which business to forward to full Area Meeting. A Learning Development Committee was convened to help Local Meetings in their organisation of these days. However, it has been found that Local Meetings have proved confident in drawing up their own agenda of activities.

Area Meeting Working Group comprises, significantly, at least a named representative and alternate from each local meeting as well as a Trustee, a Standing Nominations Committee representative, an Elder, an Overseer, the Area Meeting Clerking team, a Meeting for Sufferings representative and a representative of the Economic Justice Group. But all of us are committed to being at Working Group. People attending Working Group will communicate and report back to our Local Meeting or Group.

Working Group is NOT exclusive. It is open to any interested Friend to attend.

It meets four times a year, in the month preceding full Area Meeting. This enables Area Meeting business to progress more easily over the calendar year with no big gaps between business gatherings. There is a commitment to test a Virtual Working Group model to circumvent the geographical divides in our Area.

Additionally, we have agreed - after further consultation at Area Meeting and with Local Meetings and with our several Groups - a **Table of Responsibilities** (attached) and lines of communication between the Working Group and Area Meeting.

This model, I think, lends itself to other Area Meetings if they adopt the idea of a Working Group, to agree the content of their own Table of Responsibilities. So far, our Table seems to work fine, for us.

How are our New Arrangements Working?

Area Meeting Working Group

Our Area Meeting Working Group meets four times a year at the same central venue in Newcastle. Each Local Meeting so far, has been represented at all Working Group Meetings. We appoint a proxy should a Local Meeting be unable to send a representative or alternate. Each Group, including Elders, Overseers and Trustees - so far, has been represented at all Working Group Meetings. Quakers with several hats means that Working Group has about 12 to 16 Friends attending. It feels relaxed and comfortable and is less discursive than bigger, fuller Area Meetings. We run from 6.15pm and usually finish between 7.15pm and 8.30pm. Friends can be tasked with jobs. Friends are reporting back to their Local Meeting or Groups. The Clerking Team circulate Minutes and papers to Local Meetings and some 120 Friends within two days of Working Group. Circulating Minutes, Reports and Papers is an invaluable key to participation.

Area Meetings on Sundays

Our Sunday Area Meetings meet four times a year. We have had seven so far. Our eighth is coming up in December, 2014. Participation in terms of numbers has risen to 70, then 80, then 90 but has fallen back since then a little. Of around 50 to 60 people taking part in the morning, an average of 40 remain for the business meeting. Our smallest so far has been 45, constrained only by the size of their chosen venue. We have seen many new faces. We have seen many children – more than 20 on one occasion.

The programmes are devised and presented by the paired Local Meetings. There is no set criteria for what their occasion may be about, what it might or contain or its format of the presentation. We have had puppet shows challenging our attitudes to Trident. We have created playlets challenging our attitudes to and experience of economic injustices. We have held discussion groups, worship sharing and workshops – including community singing, creative writing - and free taster sessions of complementary medicine. We have had visiting speakers – Alex Davison and “Blooming Quakers”, Sue Holden on Economic Justice. We have heard from Andrew Greaves on the Pilgrimage for Peace and Economic Justice from Iona to London in the summer of 2013. It really has been creative, novel and indeed spiritually uplifting.

The start time of Meeting for Worship for Business has been adjusted to 2.00 pm. This is being trialled to help ensure that Friends are refreshed for the necessary business meeting, hopefully avoiding logistical tension between the day's spiritual activities and dealing with the formal business – and not exhausting Friends in attendance.

The Business Meetings from 2.00 pm with its main focus on membership matters – the sending of Loving Greetings, application visitor reports, Testimonies to the Grace of God, ministry about Friends who have recently passed away – have been deep, moving and powerful. We have been grieving for dear Friends who have died. We have been tested by membership applications from prisoners serving long sentences in local gaols. We have been delighted by Visitor Reports on attenders ... whom we always knew to be Friends. We hear “How Truth is Prospering” in our Local Meetings - these are our annual reports from our Local Meetings and are often rich in content and stories of good Friends working hard for their Meetings, reaching in and reaching out. The children have been fully involved in all aspects of the Area Meeting programmes and have brought a refreshing and enthusiastic dynamic to our gatherings.

Hospitality is shared between paired meetings. We have discovered plain brown paper Picnic Bags - a sandwich, a piece of fruit, a juice drink, and a packet of crisps. And then, of course ... Area Meeting Tea afterwards, with cake.

Conclusion

What we have done in Northumbria Area Meeting isn't radical or revolutionary – or disrespectful to tradition. We have responded to an expressed need for better opportunities for spiritual development and to get to know each other as Friends – “... to see each other's faces ...”. This led to a look at Quaker Faith and Practice and a realisation that how Area Meetings conduct their business is not prescribed – though the matters of Area Meeting business are described. Our view is that we are at liberty - or have the freedom - to find a way of managing our business which is best for us. The outcome has been that we have created space for spiritual development and have been able to facilitate Area Meetings events which have achieved much more participation by a wider range of Friends - and from all age groups. These new Area Meetings have all-age activities, speakers from within and without and workshops.

Our practice so far, is to have these inspirational days four times a year. And, so far, they have measured up to our hopes that they would be busy, varied, engaging, inclusive, inspiring and FUN. The mechanism or device which released our energies for our new Area Meetings is our Area Meeting Working Group. The components are appointed representatives - and alternates – from each Local Meeting who have made a commitment to attending Working Group regularly, and also representatives from Area Meeting Trustees, Elders, Overseers, Standing Nominations Committee, Meeting for Sufferings and our Economic Justice Group. In them we place great trust!

As all of our Area Meetings do with their own Trustees.

As all our Area Meetings do in respecting and trusting the Trustees of Britain Yearly Meeting.

We are not delegating responsibility to our Working Group. Working Group is NOT taking power over our affairs; that remains firmly with Area Meeting. We are trusting Working Group to absorb those matters of routine business which can be dealt with more effectively and efficiently by a smaller group of Friends.

What those matters are has been agreed within the wider Area Meeting through a careful, step by step process of consultation with Local Meetings. The end product has been our so-called Table of Responsibilities which sets out those matters best dealt with by Area Meeting or the Working Group. So far, it is working for us as we hoped.

A crucial dimension is that of communication. Representatives at Working Group are expected to report back at the earliest opportunity to their Local Meeting or other Group. The Clerks send out early Agendas before the Meetings. Minutes are sent out to Local Meetings within two days of

Working Group. Paper copies of reports heard or received at Working Group are also sent out. We also have a wide email circulation list which includes about half of our Members. This ensures, we believe, that Friends are informed about business which is running through Area Meeting and able to note the changes which our Minutes record.

So how are we doing? Not too bad.

We reviewed our new arrangements towards the end of 2013. Our Roving Elder reported to Area Meeting in December, 2013 that our new arrangements are working as we hoped. That is, Working Group is effectively absorbing routine business. And our spirit-led gatherings are providing for our spiritual hunger. The challenges which his report highlighted focussed on the logistics of Local Meetings of varying sizes being able to cope with large numbers of Friends arriving at their Meeting for Worship, expecting lunch and ripe for spiritual adventure. If we, as an Area Meeting, have work to do it is in this matter of logistics and catering. This is partly solved by our partnering several Local Meetings together to facilitate Area Meeting gatherings. For example, three in Local Meetings in Tynedale come together.

I mentioned our Roving Elder. We have also appointed a Roving Overseer. Their responsibility is to serve the whole Area Meeting and are not assigned to specific Local Meetings. They visit each of our Meetings, getting to know Friends, getting to know Meetings' issues and concerns, seeing our Local Meetings in the context of our Area Meeting and the wider Society of Friends. By this process of exchange of experience, co-ordination and collaboration we hope that our Roving Elder and Overseer can initiate opportunities for the Area Meeting to explore together spiritually, to learn more of our Quaker history and practice and to bring healing where there might be hurt.

At Area Meeting in December 2013 we agreed that our new arrangements could be carried forward into the future. The Clerks' Support Group has reviewed our new arrangements in December 2014.

And finally, take time to consider how your Area Meeting arranges its business. Is there a better, simpler way of handling your business? Do trust your Friends in your Meetings! They have much to offer. They seek no reward. Change is always a challenge – but taken in time and at a pace comfortable with your members it can happen. Change does prompt you to look more closely at what you do, why you do it and what spiritual direction you might wish to travel. Getting to know our Friends in the spirit, not just in the business, has been really beautiful and enriching. Seeing so many children ... and watching them work together ... is exciting and hopeful for our Area Meeting and for the Society of Friends. The collaboration between meetings takes away some of that isolation that smaller meetings experience. Friends across our Area Meeting are expressing great joy having experienced the simple, but profound, experience of working together.

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