**Quakers in Scotland – building and sustaining our communities**

The Community Sub-group of the Quakers in Scotland Co-ordinating Group was given the remit of helping Friends in Scotland consider how their worshipping communities are linked and what sort of structure would best enable this to happen. This follows on from extensive discussion of the possibility of establishing Quakers in Scotland as a single charitable body.

**Questionnaire**

We sent a questionnaire to local meetings and other groups of Quakers, encouraging them to respond, and at the same time inviting responses from individuals. The questionnaire was intended as a prompt for discussion, and we encouraged people to respond to the issues as best suited them.

We were delighted with the number of responses: most local meetings responded, and there were 18 responses from individuals, plus one from the organising group of the Shindig summer gathering. We are grateful to all who submitted their views – groups and individuals. We apologise if anyone’s submission was lost along the way: the email address given was hacked a couple of days before the deadline, and some may have got missed.

Given the instructions for responding, some chose to go beyond the scope of the questionnaire - we have attempted to recognise this in the report. As might be expected, Friends had different views on a number of issues but there was a remarkable degree of unity about the critical importance of linking with Friends in other local meetings for community building, support and learning. We found an enthusiasm for change as long as it promotes these aspects which are central to our Quaker communities. The report summarises the responses and attempts to identify point from which we can progress.

**Implications of establishing Quakers in Scotland**

The prospect of lifting the requirements of charity registration, particularly finding trustees, at the current Area Meeting level was generally approached with enthusiasm, creating opportunities to enhance community-building and learning. Friends felt that administrative requirements were uninspiring and energy-sapping when met at an intermediate level. Most Friends were also excited about shifting the responsibility for property to a national level. A few Friends reminded us that the effective administration of property requires local knowledge and work.

Gathering together in less geographically defined areas might allow for greater flexibility and possibly creativity, with online meeting opportunities contributing to this process. One hoped that “the proposed structure will evolve to meet the challenges”.

There was a sense of disenchantment with Area Meetings as they currently operate: “the same Friends saying the same things”; “if not entirely exclusive, not particularly open to change”. Most meetings reported that there are a few people heavily involved in AM, with a larger number feeling quite remote from it (though glad there are those who participate). More positively, some felt that the social aspect of contact through Area Meetings with people from other LMs was ‘enriching and educational’. Relationships between LM and AM are not always ideal: one meeting ‘felt we had been reprimanded’ in relation to an issue of how money is collected for outside charities.

Some responses emphasised the importance of communication between our various levels of governance. Receiving reports provides a sense of connection to the wider Quaker movement and can be inspirational. Many Friends cherished the contribution of all-day and residential AM sessions to a sense of community.

**Key issues: membership, eldership and pastoral care.**

Friends had diverse opinions on where membership should be held, applied for and confirmed. Almost all felt the need for local visitors. Some Friends felt this process could be organised nationally. An attender would apply to QiS, which would appoint (geographically close) visitors, receive their report and discern on the application. Other felt it should still be organised an intermediate level, whether with locally appointed visitors, or regional discernment. Some discuss dealing with membership application merely administratively, while others see it as having a significant spiritual importance.

There was diversity in opinion surrounding how Elders and Pastoral Friends should be nominated, appointed, and held accountable. Some respondents felt strongly that there needs to be a regional level for pastoral care to be administered from. The local meeting was generally seen as the right place for names to be brought forward. These would need to be confirmed by either QiS or a regional group, with opportunities for role-holders to meet regularly across Scotland and more locally, possibly enhanced by online networking. Some Friends felt that Es & PFs should operate at a local level to meet confidentiality and safeguarding concerns. Friends expressed concern that “pastoral care and spiritual guidance should not be too distant from local meetings”.

**Flexibility**

A strong thread throughout the responses was the need for flexibility. This may be in timeline, structure and geographic area covered by any intermediate groupings. Some responses suggested a transitionary period could be beneficial. In considering future structures, Friends did not feel bound by the borders of current AMs, with many expressing excitement that a more flexible arrangement could encourage closer bonds with nearby LMs that currently fall under a different AM. Some Friends also suggested having gatherings based on shared interests and concerns. We were again reminded of the benefits of blended and digital meetings for remote Friends.

Many emphasised the necessity of being part of the wider Quaker movement. These were often remote and smaller LMs. Contact with other LMs, often at the AM level, is cherished for the friendships and connection it fosters. We were also reminded of the need for a wider, authoritative group to have the power to help a local community in crisis or conflict. It was noted that AMs currently provide valuable ad hoc support for roleholders when they encounter difficulties.

Mainland Quakers may have something to learn from this contribution from an island LM: “Our experience of being a remote gathering largely online has been deeply enriching. We can envision how this could have value for others. We can see that a single AM for Scotland would make this more possible. Our online experience is enriched with face to face in person meetings. The annual Westerly Friends gathering is deeply important to us”.

An interesting perspective was given by the organisers of Shindig, which as a cross-border initiative does not have a relationship with any single AM. In particular, the comment about the young adults who take the main responsibility for organising the event was: “our experience as adult volunteers (with a mean age under 30!) is that it is very difficult for younger Friends – particularly those with full time jobs and families – to commit the time needed to sustain Quaker events and structures, and the more that we can streamline and share that load, the better”.

**Centralisation and localism**

Many responses were resistant to what they labelled as ‘over-centralisation’, though their definitions of this varied. Some responses even felt that current Area Meeting ‘housekeeping’ does not seem relevant to many (especially isolated) Friends. The need for strong pastoral and spiritual care networks was emphasised. It was not felt that administering all AM functions on a national level immediately would be prudent or palatable. Some Friends reiterated their empathy for the difficulties faced by some AMs which has led to the QiS process. One response expressed scepticism about whether the QiS approach was correct or needed at all. Friends reminded us of the need for continued consultation and any future organisation to be transparent with clear lines of responsibility.

Finally, one response summed up the dilemmas we face in the whole reorganising process: “We need a better balance between the good and nurturing; and the necessary but difficult and/or uninspiring. Where is the space for the spiritual which is after all what brings people to us?”. We are grateful to so many Meetings and individuals for spending the time to respond to this questionnaire.

**Robert Rayner and Alastair Cameron, on behalf of the Quakers in Scotland Community Sub-Group**

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