

Meeting for Sufferings, October 2025

Friends met online and on location at High Leigh from 3rd to 5th October 2025. I commend to Friends the detailed reporting on the event in *the Friend*. The minutes are available here <https://www.quaker.org.uk/documents/mfs-2025-10-follow-up-package>

This was within 48 hours of the fatal attack on worshippers at Heaton Park Synagogue, antisemitic murder on a British street. There was no mention of this in any of the introductory remarks, nor in worship on Saturday morning. I was about to rise, since no one else had, when ministry was closed. I said to the Arrangements Committee that I felt this was a failure of our faith community. An Elder did rise on Sunday to express our sorrow at the attack...and then managed to weaken it, in my view, by tagging a "...and of course victims of conflict everywhere" on the end. Sometimes, it seems, Friends cannot help but over-contextualise our statements on specific tragedies into bland universalisms. Not wrong, but a bit feeble in their generality.

We heard a report from the Treasurer and two of the Trustees. One of them a former police officer, one of them a serving magistrate, and both of those chose to take some of the time that was on the agenda to report on their stewardship of the Society's assets to grumble about the British legal system and its failure modes, managing to not actually say "Palestine Action". I spoke to both of them afterwards, to ask if this was really the best use of their time with us. They seemed to think that it was. One of them had spoken about the way that the British legal system does not concern itself with "morality" but only "legality", the other that in our courts you get not "justice" but "law". I mentioned that I've spent time in countries where the police and courts *do* concern themselves with morality and based on that experience I don't think it's better than what we have. According to the minutes, one Friend put forward by their AM was recorded on the Court and Prison register in regard to their arrest under suspicion of support for Palestine Action, others are known to be in a similar situation but were not recorded — but clearly that's in the post. My notes say that we took no action about the register because there have been no *convictions*, but the minutes suggest that we did record an arrest. Huh.

We considered the theological and community aspects of online and blended worship. Some of the issues were abundantly demonstrated by a series of serious failures of the venue's IT. During consideration of this topic Friends were reminded that at one time having a dedicated Meetinghouse to worship in was an innovation, and we somehow coped with the loss of the habits of meeting for worship both in the open air and in each-other's houses. William Tabor's statement that "The holy place is not the Meetinghouse, it is the convergence of the willing souls in the stream." (from *Four Doors to Meeting for Worship*, there's a nice summary here https://neym.org/sites/default/files/201907/Four%20Doors%20to%20Meeting%20for%20Worship_1.pdf)

We were presented with a challenge question: is it ok for the Friend worshipping from home to have a cup of tea in hand during worship? It was suggested that in a Meetinghouse the answer would be "no", although a glass of water if you had a cough would be. Sucking a cough sweet would be. Is that right?

There's more concern about blended worship than purely online worship. The online participants are largely invisible, hard to Elder, and it's hard for them to make their reactions seen. BYM Elders are developing techniques for this.

I mentioned the decades of experience there is in industry with remote working. One lesson is "one remote, all remote". Even when there are two of my engineers in the office at the same time I tell them not to sit together during our online meetings. How that is best applied to worship is not clear. Pondering continues.

We heard a very good presentation about the history of Friends' interactions with the Crown. There's an idea widely held in the 21st century Quaker world that we all are and obviously always have been radical egalitarians, socialists, republicans, and thus would naturally have nothing to do with the Crown as an institution, never mind the person of the monarch. That we are obviously a progressive vanguard! As with many other "obviously we always" beliefs that Friends have about themselves: not so. We heard about the often close relationship between Friends and the British state since the Restoration, and how that relationship has helped us to be effective in the world in the interests of our leadings. The presenter, Stuart Masters, will give the Swarthmore Lecture next year,

see <https://www.woodbrooke.org.uk/stuart-masters-to-give-2026-swarthmore-lecture/> He will consider the tensions between certain traditional, inherited leadings and certain things that Friends may feel lead to today. In discussion after Stuart's presentation it was noted that our "Loyal Address" to Charles III was the only one printed on ordinary paper delivered in a brown envelope rather than being a grand object and Charles said later that ours was the only one that had anything interesting to say. And also that a member of a military order present at the Loyal Address had said that it was good to have someone there speaking for peace. It was noted that the next king is likely to be young when he takes the throne, better to try to surround him with wise advisers. On the other hand, a Friend complained that in the address we were engaging with the dignified part of the constitution, not the effective part. But another wondered: if we give up this privilege of the loyal address, what other privileges will we give up? Our right to not swear oaths? Our right to our own marriage procedure? These were granted by the Crown. Finally, a Friend noted that the only part of the Society that was greatly exercised about our cozy relationship to the state were Young Friends, and they were not present.

Although it is apparently very obvious to staff at Friends House that "the church" and "the charity" are the same thing, it's often less than clear to Friends at large such as myself. One curious fact about this is that the Trustees (of the Charity) have directed staff (of the Charity) to propose new strategic priorities for something called "Britain Yearly Meeting", which according to the Governing Document is the Charity, and not the church. Some tea-break grumbling from Friends present suggests that this is not clear. Why, some Friends wondered, are the Trustees coming up with strategic priorities for the whole Yearly Meeting. The direction is expected to be presented to Sufferings for approval early next year. In the discussion this time I rose to speak on the need for a much more crisp articulation of the goal of "Promoting Quakerism", perhaps involving close collaboration with Discovering Quakers. Another Friend rose to suggest that Friends in general are not much interested in governance,

not much in political campaigns, but are very interested in having a spiritual oasis in their Meetings. Yet another Friend rose to suggest that in our current "peacebuilding" we are not neutral and that might be a problem.

We were led in a session to explore ideas about the future of Quaker communities. This involved a variety of activities. Groups of Friends were invited to imagine and describe various scenarios for the future of Quaker community. There was no concrete output, but the vibes will feed somehow into staff work. I was the Elder for this session, and read from Parker Palmers' *A Place Called Community*, which some of you have heard before:

"The great danger in our utopian dreams of community is that they lead us to want association with people just like ourselves....But ...In a true community we will not choose our companions, for our choices are so often limited by self-serving motives. Instead, our companions will be given to us by grace. Often they will be persons who will upset our settled view of self and world. In fact, we might define true community as that place where the person you least want to live with always lives!"

... In true community there will be enough diversity and conflict to shake loose our need to make the world in our own image...That... can be borne only if it is not community one seeks, but truth, light, God. Do not commit yourself to community, but commit yourself to the God who stands beyond all human constructions. In that commitment you will find yourself drawn into community."

It's available at <https://archive.org/details/a-place-called-community> but please make a donation to the Archive.

Yours in Friendship,
Keith Braithwaite