

Report on Meeting for Sufferings, 2 December 2023

Friends met in a blended meeting, online and at Friends House.

Full minutes are available here <https://www.quaker.org.uk/documents/mfs-2023-12-follow-up-package> The reporting on Sufferings in the Friend was as usual excellent, and I commend it to Friends. Here following are my personal reflections on the Meeting.

Regarding the proposal to appoint non-Members to serve the Society, Sufferings seemed to be relatively sanguine about Attenders serving in roles other than Trustee. It seemed very strange to Friends present that someone without Membership should serve as a Trustee. An analogy was drawn with the executive directors of a business: it would be surprising if they were neither shareholders nor employees of the business in question. Non-executive Directors, whose role is advisory might not have any other connection with the business, but executives would and Friends seemed to think that Trustees should too. It was also noted that Nominations committees at every level have in effect adopted this policy already since they face a dire shortage of Friends to fill roles and cannot restrict their nominations only to Members. Sufferings can perhaps not do more than to reflect in policy the facts on the ground, while erecting some guard rails around Trustee positions.

I rose to mention that I had asked to be relieved of my service on Central Nominations so that I could focus my energies on outreach. Rather than putting my energies into shuffling around the ever-dwindling number of active Friends between the roles we have to fill I'd rather create routes into our Society for the large number of people whom, I am morally certain, would be Quakers if only they knew that it (still) is an option. In his Swarthmore Lecture of 2014 Ben Pink Dandelion said that we should not pay much attention to falling numbers as the Society would, as in the past, do whatever it needed to do to survive without anyone having to worry about it. I wonder if he still thinks that? I'll ask the next time I see him. I do worry about it and this is what I am doing.

We received a report from Trustees, and were informed that something significant is going on with respect to Drayton House, the investment property separate from but en-block with Friends House, currently used by the Economics Department of UCL. No details are available at this time.

We received a report from the Book of Discipline revision committee. Friends are still encouraged to share ideas with the committee at <https://forms.quaker.org.uk/qfp-idea/> It seems that we will move back to having a separation between "constitutional" and "spiritual" matters, as was before the current "Red Book" was created.

One specific "constitutional" matter is the wording of our marriage declaration. Those who marry each other in the manner of Friends are currently required to invoke either "God's help" or "divine assistance". It is proposed to canvass Area Meetings on whether to remove this requirement, and what to use instead, and to report to Yearly Meeting in Session with a recommendation during 2025. I rose to mention that my wife and I had a civil wedding and that this wording in the Quaker process was part of the reason why. And also that I had asked my wife what form of words might have been acceptable to her. Ruth doesn't have a concrete alternative to propose (and nor does she owe us one) but does think that there needs to be something about a Quaker marriage process that's distinctively different from a civil wedding. Or else what's the point?

On a separate constitutional matter, we heard of proposed changes to Yearly Meeting in Session. Following the "natural experiment" last year of extra meetings of Sufferings that were open to all Friends there's a sentiment in favour of a rolling Yearly Meeting in Session (perhaps by another name) to meet several times a year. Representatives at Sufferings were divided on this. I myself am unhappy with the sentiment expressed by some that Sufferings is a sort of poor substitute for YM in Session. And that perhaps Sufferings representatives saw ourselves as some sort of "Senate". I think I detected a sense amongst some at the meeting that they have mistaken the Society of Friends for a merely democratic institution, along the lines of a workers' cooperative, trade union, secular charity, or political party. On this mistaken assumption they might think that having more Friends take part in discernment at YM in (rolling) Session is somehow more legitimate than having representatives of Area Meetings and other bodies at Sufferings perform a discernment. I do not believe this to be the case. We shall see how this question is addressed. Based on my own experience of union and party conferences the opposite happens: agenda and composite committees do act as an undeclared Senate and the "one member with one vote" is largely disenfranchised. This should be of little relevance as the Society of Friends is in fact a theocratic, or perhaps more accurately a pneumocratic, organisation and the number of Friends taking part in a discernment should not greatly signify. In addition, I understand our church government to be congregational, and Area (née Monthly) Meetings are the congregations, each autocephalous but joining with others in the Yearly Meeting to effect policies of national reach. Sufferings then is not a poor second to Yearly Meeting as it is composed to a large degree of representatives of the Area Meetings which are the definitive bodies of the Society. Responsibility flows up from Friends through Local Meetings, to Area Meetings, to Sufferings and YM in Session. Not the other way round.

In respect also of Yearly Meeting we heard a very emotional presentation regarding this year's YM, which will be something like a return to the old style of Yearly Meeting Gathering. Some Friends fear that we will meet in July perhaps during a time of declared war. Let us hope not.

Friends are encouraged to write to their MP in aid of those who remain in prison under IPP (Imprisonment for Public Protection) orders of indefinite duration.

The meeting closed as it opened, in waiting worship.

Yours in Friendship

Keith Braithwaite