

Meeting for Sufferings 6th February 2016

Another good meeting with sufficient time to consider issues that troubled and engaged people. Only 32 pages of papers in advance compared to over 100 last time!

Minutes from central committees

Two minutes were considered, one from Church Government Advisory Group (CPAG) regarding Britain Yearly Meeting (BYM) budgeting and updates to Quaker Faith and Practice (QFP) and one from Quaker Peace & Social Witness (QPSW) on possible private sponsorship scheme for refugees which the government has said it would be willing to run.

BYM budgeting process

This originated in a minute from Northumbria AM expressing concern about the lack of clarity in the BYM budgeting process and requesting revision to QFP to rectify this. MfS sent the Northumbria AM minute to CPAG for advice and their advice was that there was sufficient broad guidance on the principles of budget setting and that it was therefore not necessary to include additional detail at this time.

Private sponsorship of refugees

QPSW presented a consultation paper asking for guidance from MfS to feed into QPSW Central Committee's discernment on the matter. The paper highlighted 3 questions for MfS to consider:

1. Can you envisage local meetings – or other groupings of Quakers – being willing and able to become sponsors?
2. Would you wish BYM to register in-principle as an umbrella body and contribute to negotiating the scheme with the Home Office?

3. If so, would you want this to come back to Meeting for Sufferings, perhaps at the stage when the shape of the scheme has been agreed, for approval of the full involvement of Quakers in Britain?

In summary, the government has stated its willingness to run a private sponsorship scheme for refugees in which community groups and individuals would be able to provide full financial, practical and emotional support for their first 12 months in the UK. Some national or regional bodies have already registered their serious interest in becoming umbrella bodies which would encourage and support their members to participate in the scheme. Britain Yearly Meeting (BYM) has been approached by Citizens UK to consider joining other organisations to form an umbrella group to provide support, so QPSW Central Committee is considering whether Quakers in Britain should take an initial step towards involvement. BYM, if it registered, would not itself sponsor refugees, but would expect to be represented on the National Refugee Welcome Board to play a part in negotiating with the Home Office. This could include playing a role in encouraging and supporting Quakers – particularly Quaker Meetings – to sponsor refugees and acting as a broker, receiving offers from Meetings and commending them to the government agency charged with allocating refugees to sponsors.

As the scheme does not exist yet, there is a lack of clarity about a number of issues, though it is understood that initially it would focus on Syrian refugees. Local or Area Meetings could potentially offer to sponsor a refugee through the scheme. MfS was divided between wanting to do something to ease the terrible suffering of which we are all aware and reservations about the scheme itself and the possible implications for refugees and asylum seekers not covered by it. For example,

will this result in refugees from other countries being turned away or returned home and how will it impact on existing work with and services for refugees? There was a strong feeling that any initiative we support should be in addition to resources already devoted to work with refugees and asylum seekers. Would the AM wish to consider this further?

Our Faith in the Future: Mind the Gap

In December we met in geographically based home groups to consider the state of AMs and what we could do about it. At February's meeting the groups were reconvened to consider the theme of getting from where we are to where we would like to be, taking account of our vision for Our Faith in the Future. As before I felt that the Yorkshire group worked well together. There was a lot of common ground between us and other groups in identifying the obstacles to be overcome, such as our reluctance to explain, explore, test and practice our ways. We need to be willing to speak with a confident voice, both to the outside world and within our own Meetings.

Sustainability

We received a report from the BYM Sustainability Group on their progress to date. The general view was that a lot of work had been done already, and that it was up to us now to change our life-styles in line with our testimonies. Their report identified three main areas where more work is needed:

- 1) Strengthening the sense of community around the commitment among Friends and meetings. The group is working on this, for example through the BYM Sustainability Gathering at Swanwick in March.

2) Developing a shared story about our sustainability commitment and its base in Quaker faith and practice. The proposal is to work on this through a new project entitled Nurturing Our Sustainability Ministry in collaboration with Woodbrooke.

3) Implementing the commitment in the lives and practices of Friends and Meetings. In conjunction with central and standing committees, the group hopes to look at the support and resources that could be made available.

BYM 2016

We heard about the plans and arrangements for BYM, which will take place this year at Friends House in London from 27-30 May. The theme will be Living out our Faith in the World (Part 2) starting with hearing our stories. A spiritual preparation sheet is available and more information will be available both on line and on paper in April. For the first time this year adults will be asked to register in advance, so that staff can prepare properly including overflow facilities where needed.

Sue Goodson

AM Meeting for Sufferings Representative