

# **NONTHEIST FRIENDS NETWORK**

***NEWS UPDATE, MARCH/APRIL 2013***

**Friends,**

Much to report after our “Living on the wave’s edge” gathering and our AGM at the beginning of March, and only time to get through a part of it in this newsletter. But I think everyone who made it to Woodbrooke will agree with me that we had a great time – and everyone who didn’t make it this year missed some treats.

The highlight for many was Michael Wright’s inspiring but often challenging keynote address, which he has already emailed to everyone present who has given us their current email address. Michael took us on a guided tour of the books he has been reading recently which have helped shaped his Quaker nontheist thinking. But he also challenged us to consider whether we have done all we can to remove barriers between nontheist and theist Friends. Are there better ways of stating our Network’s aims? Should we consider dropping “nontheist” from our title, perhaps in favour of something like Open Friends Network or Progressive Friends Network? Should we pay more attention to Quakerism’s Christian roots and the radical Jesus tradition? Let the dialogue begin! Tell us what you think!

For those of you who didn’t get to Woodbrooke but would like a copy, Michael has generously offered to email it to you, or send you a paper copy if you don’t have email. Contact him direct at [michaelwright80@virginmedia.com](mailto:michaelwright80@virginmedia.com) or 25 Thornfield Road, Middlesbrough TS5 5DD.

All five workshops had a full house in at least one of their runs (each was repeated so that everyone could choose two). Deep discernment during our “Quaking with laughter” session produced some impious limericks (repeated below). And our AGM produced some bright new ideas for opening up our network to make it easier for us to... well... network with each other.

The minutes of the AGM were agreed as follows.

### **Nontheist Friends Network AGM 2013 02.03.13**

1. 48 Friends attended the 2013 AGM at Woodbrooke on Saturday March 2. Friends agreed that David Boulton should clerk the meeting with Michael Yates as minutes clerk.
2. **Minutes of the 2012 AGM** These were made available at this meeting and were agreed.
3. **Financial Report** The treasurer, Maureen Tinsley, presented her report for the year March 2012 to March 2013. The report is attached (see below) and was accepted. Friends accepted the steering group's recommendation that the membership subscription fee should remain at £20 for the year March 2013 to March 2014.
4. **Membership Report** Michael Yates presented a brief report which is attached and was accepted.
5. **Convenor's Report** David Boulton presented a report which is attached and was accepted. Thanks were offered to Miriam Yagud for her work with Friends House in connection with our listing as a recognised listed informal group of BYM.
6. **Networking and Email discussion group** Jean Wardrop presented a set of proposals for an NFN e-mail group, prepared by Brian Wardrop and explained by her to the meeting. This proposal is attached. The meeting discussed the question of the membership of the group and it was generally felt that this should be a fully discreet group not accessible to non-NFN members and contacts. The question of the suitability of Google hosting this was raised.  
The meeting supported the proposal in principle and authorised the steering group to discuss how this might best be pursued. Issues of access to the forum and its code of conduct should be further investigated by the steering group. The meeting asked the steering group to find a sustainable ethical provider to host the group.  
Thanks were expressed to Brian and Jean.
7. **Leaflets** The meeting asked the steering group to produce an up-dated leaflet.
8. **NFN at BYM 2013** Britain Yearly Meeting 2013 is to be held at Friends House over the weekend of May 24-27. Nontheists have held open sessions during BYM in 2011 and 2012: these proved worthwhile. The steering group has applied for a room and a stall this year and awaits a reply from Friends House.
9. **BYM Gathering 2014 (Bath)** Quaker Committee for Christian and Interfaith Relations has invited the Network to take part in a joint session with them during this event. The steering group was encouraged to pursue this.
10. **Regional Events** David Boulton encouraged the setting up of appropriate regional events which the steering group would support as appropriate. He stressed that the organisation needed to be done by NFN members in their own areas. Jean Wardrop asked those in the east of England to contact her with a view to setting up such an event. [email [jean@wardrop.org.uk](mailto:jean@wardrop.org.uk) ]
11. **Proposed Constitution** A draft constitution had been forwarded to Friends in advance of the AGM. The steering group was asked to re-visit the wording of Item 7, perhaps referring to "discerning the sense of the meeting". The steering group was asked to continue work on preparing a minimalist constitution and present it at next year's AGM.
12. **Appointment of steering group members** Frank Bonner, David Boulton, Miriam Branson, Tim Regan, Maureen Tinsley, Jean Wardrop, Michael Wright and Michael Yates were appointed to serve on the NFN steering group for the coming year.

# 2013 AGM REPORTS

## **MEMBERSHIP SECRETARY'S REPORT**

As of 24.02.13, NFN membership stood at 102 compared with 103 at the same time last year. A further 92 Friends are in touch as interested contacts compared with 59 at the same stage last year. By last weekend 23 Friends had paid their subscription for 2013/2014. It would help the membership secretary and our treasurer if Friends present at Woodbrooke who wish to join or renew their membership for 2013/14 could fill in an application form and give it, with cash or a cheque, to the membership secretary before they leave.

*Michael Yates, Membership Secretary*

## **TREASURER'S REPORT, MARCH 2012 TO MARCH 2013**

<i>Income:</i>		<i>Expenditure:</i>	
Membership Fees:	£2,000 00	Woodbrooke deposit 2013:	£912.00
Conference Fees:	£8,740.00	Planning Meet Wdbrooke:	£456.00
Donations:	£122.00	Refunds:	£45.00
Book Sales:	£133.00	Office expenditure:	£50.34
Planning Meeting:	£228.00	2013 Conf. Fees (est):	£8,088.00
<b>Total income</b>	<b>£11223.00</b>	<b>Total expenditure</b>	<b>£9551.34</b>

*Maureen Tinsley, Hon. Treasurer*

## **CONVENOR'S REPORT**

An active year in which the Network was accepted by Britain Yearly Meeting as a recognised listed informal group of BYM. We increased our database of contacts; attracted significant attention at our meeting during YM; published regular updates; published several articles on nontheism in *The Friend* and *Friends Quarterly*.

Our steering group had a series of meetings by email and an away weekend at Woodbrooke to plan the 2013 conference. Miriam Yagud asked to be released from the steering group and was thanked for all her hard and enthusiastic work on our behalf. Jean Wardrop was co-opted to the group and has already made an impact. This was the year in which the Network secured formal recognition as one strand within our diverse Religious Society of Friends.

*David Boulton, Convenor*

The following discussion paper by Brian Wardrop was put to the AGM by Jean Wardrop and approved as a basis for action by the steering group.

## **A Google group for Nontheist Quakers in the UK**

The Steering Committee of the UK Nontheist Friends Network may wish to consider the creation of a Google group to support e-mail discussion between members of the Group.

The creation and running of a Google group is relatively simple once a number of aspects have been agreed:

1. The **name** of the Google group to be created. At the time of writing, the names “Nontheist Quakers”, “Nontheist Friends” and “Nontheist UK Quakers” are available.
2. The **purpose** of the Google group. Wording may be of the form “To support UK Quakers who wish to explore varieties of nontheism as a recognised strand within modern diverse liberal Quakerism.
3. **Ownership** of the group. It is recommended that the group be owned by the Steering Group of the Nontheist Friends Network, who are responsible for its proper functioning. In the event that the group is felt to no longer fulfil its purpose, the Steering Group may have the group closed and deleted.
4. **Group membership** is open to Members and Attenders of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain and Ireland.
5. Agree who will be responsible for authorising group membership applications, and the basis on which this decision will be made.
6. Appoint at least two Moderators (and preferably three) for the group who will monitor postings to the group and take agreed action in the event of breaches of the Code of Conduct.
7. **Code of Conduct.** Members of the Google group will be expected to adhere to a code of conduct when using the group to interact with its other members. Group Moderators will have the responsibility of ensuring that the code of conduct is complied with, and will terminate membership of those who fail to comply.

And that’s just one of the ways we plan to developing our capacity to network with each other. Here’s another:

## ***SHARING ADDRESSES***

We would like to share our list of names, email addresses, postal addresses and telephone numbers with everyone else on our list, so that anyone can contact anyone else, especially others in their own locality, maybe just to link

up, or maybe for a specific purpose such as sounding out the possibility of organising a local event.

But for this to happen we need your permission. Not everyone will want their contact details made available in this way, and of course we respect this. So if you would prefer to opt out, *please let us know before the end of April at the latest*. If we have not heard from you, we'll take it that we have your permission to include you in the shared listings.

And here's another:

### ***EXPAND THE NEWSLETTER...***

...by including short articles, letters or reviews from members and supporters. Turn this letter into an open forum for ideas and comments. Let us have your contributions – and, as we expand, consider offering some editorial support!

### **2013/14 Membership**

Sorry to remind you about this, but your 2012/13 membership subscription ran out on March 3! If you haven't already renewed it (and thank you those who have), please send your cheque for £20 to our membership secretary, Michael Yates, at 38 Sandholme Close, Giggleswick, North Yorks. BD24 0AF. And if you've not yet got round to joining and helping us cover our costs, Michael will be glad to receive a cheque from you.

### **Woodbrooke gathering, 2014**

Yes, Woodbrooke gets booked up a good year in advance these days, so we've got our reservation in quickly. Make a note of it now! Next year's gathering will be held on March 21-23 2014.

Woodbrooke's charges are going up a little so we need to keep pace. The charge for 2014 will be £195 for en suite accommodation, meals, and full conference participation.

However, this year, for the first time, we are offering “early bird” registration before April 30 at £185, a saving of £10. The catch? Frankly, we need a dozen or so registrations at £185 to pay Woodbrooke’s deposit, so we are asking for the full amount, not just a deposit. But we do recognise that plans sometimes change, especially when bookings are made so far in advance, and refunds will be made on cancellations up to December 31.

If you can help us with an early-bird registration that’s great, but if you’d rather wait till after April and book with a £50 deposit that’s fine by us.

Either way, cheques made out to Nontheist Friends Network should be posted to NFN, c/o Hobsons Farm, Cowgill, Dent, Sedbergh, Cumbria LA10 5RF.

### ... and finally (for the time being), those limericks

There was an old Friend from Devizes  
Whose legs were of different sizes.  
The left was quite small,  
But the right ten feet tall.  
Diversity springs such surprises!

Jehovah said, 'This is a mess!  
My creatures no longer confess  
They are miserable sinners -  
They think they're all winners!  
It's a problem I have to address.'

There once was a dissident Quaker  
Who didn't believe in her Maker.  
She was equally quick  
To mythologize Old Nick.  
Neither Heaven nor Hades would take her!

...which is where I'd better stop before I warrant a right royal eldering...

David Boulton

Convenor

[dboultondent@btinternet.com](mailto:dboultondent@btinternet.com)

Hobsons Farm, Cowgill, Dent, Sedbergh, Cumbria LA10 5RF

# **NONTHEIST FRIENDS NETWORK**

**NEWS UPDATE, JUNE 2013**

**Friends,**

A warm welcome to Friends who have joined since our March/April Newsletter, and thanks to all who have renewed their membership for 2013/14.

Your steering group has not been idle since our March gathering and AGM, and there's lots to report.

## **EMAIL DISCUSSION GROUP**

Our AGM endorsed a proposal by Jean Wardrop and supported by the steering group for setting up a moderated email discussion forum. Jean and her husband Brian have been hard at work implementing this, testing it first on steering group guinea-pigs. Invitations have now gone out, or are in process of going out, to all *current members* to sign up and start enjoying the opportunity of free communication with other members, sharing news, views, ideas, comments, short articles and recommended links. That way our Network makes a reality of *networking*.

Initially, invitations to sign up are limited to current paid-up (2013/14) members of the Network, and new members who join during the year. We want this to be a forum where we can communicate with each other in confidence, and not just another open Quaker forum. *Please note that invitations will be held open for 30 days, after which it will necessary to make a new application.*

If you are receiving this Newsletter as a non-member on our extensive contacts list, you can of course join the email forum by first joining the Network – see under [Membership](#) below.

The first batch of invitations went out last week and 20 of you signed up within 24 hours or so. We hope that most if not all our members using email will recognise the opportunities for *real networking* that this forum will provide. Members can communicate directly with each other without having to go through the steering group. The forum is free. You don't have to have an additional email address, or change your computer settings. To contribute, you just write your email and send it to [quaker-nontheists@yahoogroups.com](mailto:quaker-nontheists@yahoogroups.com) and everyone in the forum will receive it.

*As the forum grows, it is likely to become the main means by which we communicate with each other between conferences and AGMs, so that those who choose not to join will risk missing out on shared information and experiences. Initially, our occasional Newsletters will continue to be sent to all on our contacts list, but a newsletter, by its nature, is top-down communication, and no substitute for a free networking forum.*

So if you haven't yet done so, please reply to your invitation as soon as possible. And if you haven't yet received an invitation, check that you have paid your Network sub (£20) for 2013/14 and keep an eye on your emails!

**Please note: this new forum is distinct from the long-running (and excellent) American-based international forum [nontheist-friends@googlegroups.com](mailto:nontheist-friends@googlegroups.com) which is open to nontheist Friends all over the world. The new forum will have a more British focus and perspective.**

## ***PLANS FOR ANNUAL GATHERING, 2014***

Next year's NFN annual Gathering and AGM will be at Woodbrooke on March 21 – 23. Your steering group is holding its planning session at Woodbrooke next month, July 2 – 4, and will discuss the form and content of the Gathering. The kinds of questions we'll be asking are:

*A speaker-based event, as in 2011 (when we had three keynote speakers), or a more mixed event (workshops, base groups, one keynote speaker) as in 2012?*

*Speaker or speakers from within the nontheist Friends family, or a wider range and a broader focus?*

*A single overarching theme, or a range of themes relating to nontheism among Friends?*

*What's the best balance between large-group and small-group sessions?*

*The steering group would welcome your input before it meets. Ideas, comments, offers to [dboultondent@btinternet.com](mailto:dboultondent@btinternet.com) (or NFN, Hobsons Farm, Cowgill, Dent LA10 5RF) before the end of June, please! Or get the email discussion forum sizzling with ideas right away!*

Meanwhile, you don't have to wait to make sure we reserve one of Woodbrooke's 60 available rooms for you. Woodbrooke's charges have gone up this year so you will understand that we need to keep pace. The charge for 2014 will be £195 for en suite accommodation, meals, and full conference participation. Please send a cheque for the full amount or for a £50 deposit to NFN, Hobsons Farm, Cowgill, Dent LA10 5RF, payable to Nontheist Friends Network. Cancellation before December 31 is free (less a £5 admin fee), but after that there will be penalties on a sliding scale, increasing the closer we get to March 21 in accordance with our contract with Woodbrooke. (We are contracted to pay for rooms booked, whether occupied or not).

But we do not want anyone to miss out because the cost is too high for them and we hope to be able to offer bursary assistance to specific low-income groups in so far as our limited resources make this possible. More details in our next Newsletter.

## ***OUR NEW LEAFLET***

We have produced a new leaflet, *Introducing the Nontheist Friends Network*, replacing the outdated one from 2011. In three colours and an attractive layout, it is designed for distribution in meetings and events, and possibly as an insert in Quaker publications. To view it, see the attachment sent with this Newsletter. If you can use a few copies, email [dboultondent@btinternet.com](mailto:dboultondent@btinternet.com)

and we'll arrange for some to be posted to you. After all, they won't do anyone any good sitting in a box under someone's bed!

## **FORTHCOMING EVENTS**

There are several events coming up which should be of interest to nontheist Friends.

The Sea of Faith Network (“exploring and promoting religious faith as a human creation”) holds its annual conference at **Leicester** on July 23 – 25. The theme is “For the Common Good” and speakers include Alom Shaha, author of the best-selling *Young Atheists Handbook*, and Chris Howson, author of *A Just Church*. Details from [www.sofn.org.uk](http://www.sofn.org.uk)

SoF is also running a one-day conference in **London** on Saturday September 21, 10.30am – 5pm, at St John's Church, Waterloo Road, SE1 8TW. The theme is “Secular Religion” and the speakers are Stephen Batchelor, Don Cupitt and Richard Holloway. Again, details from [www.sofn.org.uk](http://www.sofn.org.uk)

The indefatigable Jean Wardrop is hoping to organise our first NFN regional conference for London area and East Anglia Friends on one of the October Saturdays, at **Chelmsford**. Michael Wright has agreed to speak, and Jean is hoping to find a second speaker from among Young Friends. More details in our next Newsletter and, no doubt, on our discussion forum shortly - [quaker-nontheists@yahoogroups.com](mailto:quaker-nontheists@yahoogroups.com)

Moving northwards, on Saturday October 5 David Boulton has been invited by the Joint Liaison Committee of the North and West Cumbria Area Meetings to speak or run a workshop at **Cockermouth**. The subject is likely to be “Quaker Unity and Quaker Diversity”. Details to follow.

## **RECENT EVENTS**

The steering group held an open meeting in Friends House London at **Yearly Meeting** on May 25. We were allocated a room holding 35 people and it was packed, with additional seating on the floor! Some visitors told us they had

never heard of nontheist Friends before! There was a lively discussion, which prompted Sarah Richards to write the stimulating article below. Our new leaflet was widely distributed. We also ran an NFN stall in the YM Fair on the Sunday evening which attracted considerable interest among those who managed to pick us out in the overcrowded room.

Michael Wright spoke to **Darlington** meeting on May 2, David Boulton to **Sutton** meeting on May 10, and to **Leicester** Sea of Faith group on June 8. Muriel Seltman published her new book, *Bread and Roses: Nontheism and the Human Spirit*, in April. We hope Muriel will tell us more about the book on the email forum.

## **QUAKER DISCERNMENT: A NON-THEIST VIEW**

SARAH RICHARDS contributed this article following questions raised about 'discernment' at the NFN open meeting at Yearly Meeting on May 25.

Quakers claim that their business method functions by the Meeting, in worship, collectively finding 'the will of God'. How can this be reconciled with a non-theist viewpoint which suggests that there is no external supernatural interventionist 'God' to have a will to follow?

Non-theism is, of course, a broad spectrum, so I should perhaps first identify my own place on it. I am what I think our Friends in the US would call a 'naturalist': I do not believe in any form of eternal entity which can, at will, cause unique violations of the laws of physics, chemistry and biology. That is not to say that we humans understand those laws completely, and there are almost certainly instances where such laws *appear* to be violated but where in fact they are not: it is simply that our understanding does not yet extend to the mechanisms of that particular case. I would include the notion of an external entity putting a thought or idea into a person's mind as being a violation of known laws, even though we do not know what consciousness is or where it comes from: so the idea of faithful Quakers waiting for an external being to put into one or more of their minds the ideas it wants put into effect is one I cannot accept as being an expression of the truth, of what really happens in a Meeting for Worship for business (hereinafter abbreviated to MWB). I do have an open mind on whether there might be some kind of Entity of Ultimate Reality which is beyond both the space and time in which we live and our comprehension, but which might in some way provide a reason why anything exists at all: but that is another story. Such an entity would not in any way have human characteristics, and would certainly not have a will in the sphere of the kind of actions with which we deal in our MWBs, at any level (local, area or whatever).

However, I also come to my theological position (spiritual position?) from the point of view of a mathematician: and I find my knowledge of mathematics very helpful because it has things to say

about the nature of existence. In particular, it posits different kinds of existence. Something can exist conceptually, and be used in mathematical calculations and descriptions, without having any equivalent existence realised in the parameters of the world we live in. Perhaps the best known of these is the quantity usually denoted by  $i$ , the square root of minus one. A brief explanation: it can readily be shown that a negative number multiplied by another negative number results in a positive number. Therefore there is no real number which multiplied by itself – squared, that is – results in a negative number: whether the starting number was positive or negative, the result of squaring will always be a positive number. Mathematicians are unfazed by this fact, and simply imagine that there is nevertheless such a number: as it cannot be real they label it an imaginary number and call it  $i$ . This raises the interesting question as to whether that number exists!

So I find it quite natural that there should be some concept, such as 'the will of God', which exists in the same way as the square root of minus one: it has no real existence but nevertheless exists as a concept which is useful and can give helpful results. Now it is my experience that there is what you might call a set of principles and values, which would include all the Quaker testimonies, as well as the 'best' (best in whose view, though, on what scale of judgement?) of human attributes such as compassion, love, fairness and so on. These things would be what theists think of as the Will of God, assuming a God of love such as we can infer from what we know of the teaching of Jesus, though not of course the God described in the Old Testament, who is often described as having attributes which none of us would wish to worship – starting with the desire to smite one's enemies dead. But there is no reason why we should not accept such a set of the 'good' values and attributes as what is meant by 'the will of God' without needing to attach them to an external entity of any kind: they can just be 'a way that works' which exists as a concept without needing a being to 'hold' it. In our discernment, therefore, we can think of seeking collectively the way which is in accordance with this conceptual way, and think of 'following the leadings of the Spirit' as the operation of our searching process done with an awareness of that way. This seems to me to be a perfectly legitimate view of the Quaker business method which is compatible with a non-theist position.

Finally, it is worth commenting on the notion that something is 'good' or 'best' or 'highest' independently of a God who lays down what is good. Julian Baggini, in his fascinating book 'The Pig that wants to be eaten', tells of a philosopher – a less than sycophantic character – challenging the Almighty God who appears just a little intimidated by this fierce intellect questioning His authority. The philosopher asks the Almighty whether something is good because God says it is, or whether God declares something good because in His infinite wisdom He knows it *is* good. God initially replies that the former is the case: but the philosopher then suggests that in that case, something manifestly evil such as the torturing of children would become 'good' simply by God declaring it to be so. 'Ah,' says God, taking his cue from Captain Mainwaring, 'Just testing: of course the answer is really the latter, since the former is clearly absurd'. 'So', says the philosopher, 'Good and evil then are independent of You: things are intrinsically good or bad without the need for a deity to say so'. God, at this point, retires in confusion.

This cautionary tale indicates that it is quite reasonable to think of values and principles that are good in themselves, which will form part of what I referred to as 'the way', without the need for a separated Mind of God to evaluate them as good. This confirms my suggestion of a 'will of God'

which can exist without the need for a God to will it: a non-theist solution to the concept of Quaker Discernment.

*Editor's note: How do you understand Quaker discernment from a nontheist perspective? What is your take on Sarah's article? If you have signed up to [nontheist-friends@yahoogroups.com](mailto:nontheist-friends@yahoogroups.com) share your views and comments there.*

## **2013/14 Membership**

Finally, please remember that 2012/13 membership subscriptions ran out in March! If you haven't already renewed it (and thank you those who have), please send your cheque for £20 to our new membership secretary, address below. And if you've been receiving our Newsletters but haven't yet got round to joining and helping us cover our costs, your membership application will be received with gratitude!

Note that Michael Yates has stood down as Membership Secretary and Miriam Branson has taken over the role. We thank Michael for his painstaking and meticulous work since the Network was formed, and we shall continue to value his contributions as a member of the steering group.

### ***Your steering group contacts:***

David Boulton, Convenor and Newsletter editor: [dboultondent@btinternet.com](mailto:dboultondent@btinternet.com) or Hobsons Farm, Cowgill, Dent, Sedbergh, Cumbria LA10 5RF

Miriam Branson, Membership Secretary: [miriam.branson@waitrose.com](mailto:miriam.branson@waitrose.com) or 6 James Street, Kinver, W. Midlands DY7 6ED

Maureen Tinsley, Treasurer: [tinsleymaureen@virginmedia.com](mailto:tinsleymaureen@virginmedia.com) or 9 Allingham Court, Newcastle-upon-Tyne NE7 7FD

Jean Wardrop, Email Discussion Group organiser: [jean@wardrop.org.uk](mailto:jean@wardrop.org.uk) or 105 Humber Road, Chelmsford, Essex CM1 7PG

Frank Bonner: [bonnfrank@gmail.com](mailto:bonnfrank@gmail.com)

Michael Wright: [michaelwright80@virginmedia.com](mailto:michaelwright80@virginmedia.com)

Michael Yates: [mich\\_chris@btinternet.com](mailto:mich_chris@btinternet.com)

Tim Regan: [timregan@microsoft.com](mailto:timregan@microsoft.com)

**THOUGHT FOR THE MONTH:** "Religions ... are among the most important biological functions of mankind. Their stimulant and anaesthetic effect is so great that Professor Leuba goes so far as to say

that so long as men can *use* their God, they care very little who he is, or even whether he is at all. 'The truth of the matter can be put,' says Leuba, 'in this way; God is not known; he is not understood; he is used, sometimes as moral support, sometimes as friend, sometimes as an object of love. If he proves himself useful, the religious consciousness asks for no more than that. Does he really exist? What is he? How does he exist? are so many irrelevant questions. Not God, but life, more life, a larger, richer, more satisfying life is the end of religion. The love of life, at any and every level of development, is the religious impulse'."

William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902). Contributed by Laurie Andrews

# **NONTHEIST FRIENDS NETWORK**

**NEWS UPDATE, AUGUST 2013**

Friends,

Suddenly it's all happening and there's lots of news. Conferences, events, new developments. Read all about it!

## **Our 2014 annual conference**

Six members of your steering group met at Woodbrooke in July to carry forward the Network's work and, in particular, to plan next year's annual conference. We discussed the radical idea of having no keynote speakers and conducting the entire conference in small groups. But we agreed that we should first decide on a theme, and let the theme dictate the form.

As our discussions developed we found ourselves drawn to a theme which would recognise and celebrate the growing diversity of nontheism not only in Quakerism but also in the mainstream churches and beyond. So we settled on a title: **Nontheism among Quakers and Beyond**.

The result should be our most ambitious and adventurous conference yet!

I am delighted to report that among our guests will be **Paul Parker**, Recording Clerk of Britain Yearly Meeting, and **Helen Rowlandson**, joint signatories to the much talked-about Whoosh Epistle (of which more below). In accepting our invitation, Paul wrote: 'I value the Nontheist Friends Network as a part of the kaleidoscope of Quaker views and groups, and would be glad of the opportunity to meet with you.'

To broaden the discussion beyond Quakerism we have invited **Brian Mountford** to be a keynote speaker. Brian is the author of *Christian Atheist: Belonging without Believing* (O Books) and has worked in Oxford for 25 years as vicar of the University Church and Fellow of St Hilda's College. His book, a best-seller in its field, validates the Christian atheist position within the broad spectrum of Christianity, and says to the churches 'You ignore this phenomenon at your peril, because the ground between atheist and religious adherent is a fertile source of meaning and value'.

Opening the field up further to encompass Quaker, Christian, Buddhist, Jewish and secular expressions of nontheism, I'll be talking about my own work over the past ten years in the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand (as well as here at home), as I hand over the convenorship of our Network to a new pair of hands.

But it won't all be platform speakers. We plan to provide ample opportunities for open participation as we divide our time between the keynote presentations and creative small-group

discussion where everyone will be empowered to share their experiences and make their own contribution to the conference themes.

All this, *and* the not-to-be-missed fabulous Woodbrooke experience.

We are now taking bookings. Places will be limited, so act now to secure yours.

**The dates: Friday March 21 to Sunday March 23, 2014**

**The place: Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre, Selly Oak, Birmingham**

**All-in fee for registration and full board: £195 per person**

It helps if you can pay the full amount when making your booking, but a deposit of £50 is acceptable, the balance to be paid by December 1st 2013. Information on possible bursary assistance is available on request. Your fees will be reimbursed, less a £5 admin fee, if you have to cancel before December 1<sup>st</sup>. After December 1<sup>st</sup> we can only offer part-reimbursement or none at all, depending on how close your cancellation is to the conference date and whether we are able to re-let your room.

Cheques made payable to Nontheist Friends Network and marked on the back 'WB2014' should be sent to **Jean Wardrop, 105 Humber Road, Chelmsford, Essex CM1 7PG**. Be sure to advise Jean of any special needs (diet, ground floor accommodation, etc). Please do *not* contact Woodbrooke direct, as they will only refer you back to us. (And please remember to sign your cheque! You'd be surprised how many Friends forget!)

## So what's Whoosh?

Whoosh is an epistle to all BYM meetings signed by Paul Parker and Helen Rowlands on behalf of 57 Friends who met at Woodbrooke last July under the auspices of Quaker Life. Its aim was 'to energise the Religious Society of Friends in Britain, and to help it build on the past and present to create fresh fizz and purpose for the future'. The epistle asks: 'Do we have the courage to speak with passion and conviction about our spiritual lives? Can we acquire the confidence to find our own words to express the ways in which we understand the divine? Can we encourage others as they reach for the language that is right for them?... We acknowledge our need for experimentation and openness to change.'

The Whoosh Epistle uses traditional Quaker language ('the divine', 'realising God's purpose for our Society'), but it recognises that 'growing numbers of people have rejected all claims to absolute truth', and urges 'a new radicalism in response to turbulent times'. Paul and Helen will want to know what we as nontheist Friends can bring to the table by way of 'fresh fizz and purpose'. So let's plan to come together with hearts and minds prepared!

Full text of Whoosh is available on <http://www.quaker.org.uk/whoosh-epistle-July-2012>

## More events for your diary

The Network is involved in three major meetings around the country over the next few months. Please put the dates in your diary and book early!

**Saturday October 5<sup>th</sup>**

### ***Living at the Wave's Edge: Quaker Diversity in Action***

A one-day event organised by the Joint Liaison Committee of North and West Cumbria Area Meetings. **David Boulton** will lead a two-part workshop and discussion on *Quaker Faith and Practice 20.06* which reads: 'Please be patient, those of you who have found a rock to stand on, with those of us who haven't and with those of us *who are not even looking for one*. We live on the wave's edge, where sea, sand and sky are all mixed up together... Some of us stay there from choice because it is exciting and it *feels like the right place to be.*'

**Cockermouth Quaker Meeting House, Kirkgate, Cockermouth, Cumbria CA13 9PH**

**10.00am to 4.00pm with tea and lunch breaks**

Further information from [Judith@dip.edi.co.uk](mailto:Judith@dip.edi.co.uk)

\*\*\*\*\*

**Saturday October 19<sup>th</sup>**

### ***Prayer Beyond Belief***

**MICHAEL WRIGHT**, a member of our steering group and Media Officer of the Progressive Christianity Network, is the keynote speaker at this, *the first of our NFN regional one-day conferences*. We hope it will be widely supported by members in the London and East Anglia areas. Lunch and refreshments provided, suggested donation £10.

**CHELMSFORD QUAKER MEETING HOUSE, RAINSFORD ROAD, CM1 2QL**

**10.00AM TO 4.30 PM.**

**FURTHER INFORMATION AND RESERVATIONS:** [jean@wardrop.org.uk](mailto:jean@wardrop.org.uk) (Tel 01245 354308)

Directions from <http://www.midessexquakers.org.uk/chelmsford-travel-directions.php>

\*\*\*\*\*

**Saturday January 25<sup>th</sup> 2014**

### ***Faith, what's God got to do with it?***

**One-day conference organised by the Quaker Committee for Christian and Interfaith Relations.**

The first in an on-going series of events planned by QCCIR designed to increase mutual awareness and understanding of different positions within BYM, supported by our Network. Presentations by **REX AMBLER**, **DAVID BOULTON** and **PHILIP GROSS**, chair **CHRISTINE DAVIS**. There will be follow-

up sessions at Yearly Meeting Gathering 2014. All Area Meetings are invited by QCCIR to appoint a member to attend. Applications from Friends not officially appointed by AMs are invited and will be placed on a waiting list.

**FRIENDS MEETING HOUSE, EUSTON ROAD, LONDON**

**10.30am to 4.00pm**

**INFORMATION AND BOOKINGS:** [www.quaker.org.uk/qccirconf](http://www.quaker.org.uk/qccirconf) or **Graham Spackman,**  
[grahams@quaker.org.uk](mailto:grahams@quaker.org.uk) or **020 7663 021.**

\*\*\*\*\*

## What are we here for?

When your steering group met in July we drafted a revised statement of aims for open discussion by the membership. It reads:

*The Nontheist Friends Network, a listed informal group of Britain Yearly Meeting, aims to provide a forum and supportive framework for Friends who view religion as a human creation or wish to explore the implications of this viewpoint. We celebrate theological diversity in respectful acceptance of different views, experiences and journeys within modern liberal Quakerism.*

Have we got the wording right? We invite your views on our email forum, [quaker-nontheists@yahogroups.com](mailto:quaker-nontheists@yahogroups.com) (open only to members who have opted in – see below). In the light of this discussion, the steering group will put a final version to the 2014 AGM as part of our new constitution. Please do let us know what you think.

If you are a paid-up member of the Network you should have received a personal invitation to join the forum, with 30 days in which to respond. Every new member is sent an invitation. *The forum is becoming the principal means by which we network with each other.* If you want to participate in the discussion and haven't yet joined, email the administrator, Jean Wardrop, [jean@wardrop.org.uk](mailto:jean@wardrop.org.uk)

## ...and a website

Jean and Brian Wardrop have also been creating a website for the Network which should be up and running within a few days of your receiving this Newsletter. Give them a week or so, then try [www.nontheist-quakers.org.uk](http://www.nontheist-quakers.org.uk) and see if it flies! As it grows and is regularly refreshed it will carry details of NFN events, talks, publications. Don't confuse it with the excellent American-based [nontheistfriends.org](http://nontheistfriends.org) which has been running for some years.

## Revising Faith and Practice?

BYM Recording Clerk Paul Parker is asking meetings and other Quaker groups whether the time has come to begin the process of revising *Quaker Faith & Practice*. In a briefing note he asks a number of questions, including 'Do Friends in your AM / group consider that *Quaker faith & practice* adequately reflects the current faith and practice among British Friends? If not, what particular recent developments in our faith and practice do you believe need to be more fully reflected?'

We pride ourselves on being the only religious society which revises its 'scriptures' every 30 years or so! But revision has always been a tense process. As the Introduction to the current (1994) *F&P* puts it, 'Pressure for revision has always come from the generality of Friends, but each revision has met with resistance from some who had lived with the old words and had found them entirely satisfying'. Some Friends will resist change, some will press for it. That's life – even Quaker life!

Should our Network take this opportunity to make a case for some changes, responding to Paul Parker's question whether 'particular recent developments... need to be more fully reflected'? That's another question we've started discussing on our email forum, and I hope more of you will join in.

What follows are my own tentative views, not yet tested against the wisdom of the steering group. Please challenge them if you take a different view.

Whatever revisions are proposed, whether now or later, the objective should be to make a new *Q&P* better reflect the growing diversity of our Society, and the need for more carefully inclusive language. This doesn't mean banishing traditional God-language, particularly in the anthology sections which reflect Quaker writings over three and a half centuries, but it does mean acknowledging that, as the Society's website [www.quaker.org.uk](http://www.quaker.org.uk) says in the bit on Quaker beliefs, 'There is a great deal of diversity within the Quakers on conceptions of God, and we use different kinds of language to describe religious experience. Some Quakers... are happy to use God-centred language', but 'some call themselves agnostics or humanists or nontheists and describe their experiences in ways that avoid the use of the word God entirely'. That is a real change from the early 1990s, and it should surely be reflected in any revision, particularly of Chapter 27 on Unity and Diversity.

Whether or not the Network as a body decides to make a formal response to Paul's questions, I hope individual members will join the discussions which will now start taking place in Local and Area meetings. Not with a view to pushing for a privileged position for nontheism or any other particular Quaker viewpoint, but gently making the case for reflecting a growing theological diversity within the Society, doing so with tender regard for those who fear change.

Paul's briefing notes and questions to meetings and Quaker groups may be found at [www.quaker.org.uk/gfpconsult](http://www.quaker.org.uk/gfpconsult) Meetings, groups and individuals are invited to consider the queries and to respond no later than 30 November 2013 to the Recording Clerk at Friends House, using the email address [gfp@quaker.org.uk](mailto:gfp@quaker.org.uk). Responses can also be logged online at [www.quaker.org.uk/gfpconsult](http://www.quaker.org.uk/gfpconsult)

Meeting for Sufferings will be considering a digest of the responses received at a meeting early in 2014, and will then consider the way forward for recommendation to Yearly Meeting.

## ... and finally...

Some changes on your steering group. Tim Regan has stepped down and we thank him for his continuing support. Sarah Richards has been co-opted. Jean Wardrop is now looking after bookings for our 2014 Woodbrooke conference, and Miriam Branson has taken over from Michael Yates as our membership secretary. It's a busy team!

David Boulton, Convenor and Newsletter editor: [dboultondent@btinternet.com](mailto:dboultondent@btinternet.com) or Hobsons Farm, Cowgill, Dent, Sedbergh, Cumbria LA10 5RF

Miriam Branson, Membership Secretary: [miriam.branson@waitrose.com](mailto:miriam.branson@waitrose.com) or 6 James Street, Kinver, W. Midlands DY7 6ED

Maureen Tinsley, Treasurer: [tinsleymaureen@virginmedia.com](mailto:tinsleymaureen@virginmedia.com) or 9 Allingham Court, Newcastle-upon-Tyne NE7 7FD

Jean Wardrop, Email Forum organiser: [jean@wardrop.org.uk](mailto:jean@wardrop.org.uk) or 105 Humber Road, Chelmsford, Essex CM1 7PG

Frank Bonner: [bonnfrank@gmail.com](mailto:bonnfrank@gmail.com)

Sarah Richards: [sarahrchds@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:sarahrchds@yahoo.co.uk)

Michael Wright: [michaelwright80@virginmedia.com](mailto:michaelwright80@virginmedia.com)

Michael Yates: [mich\\_chris@btinternet.com](mailto:mich_chris@btinternet.com)

*In friendship,*

**David Boulton**  
**Convenor**

*Afterthought for the day:*

'Quakers are a bridge people. I remain on that bridge, part of my roots reaching back into the Christian past and part *stretching forward into the future where new symbols are being born.*' (Damaris Parker-Rhodes, QF&P 27:44).

# **NONTHEIST FRIENDS NETWORK**

## **NEWS UPDATE, OCTOBER/NOVEMBER 2013**

Friends,

Clocks go back, the night now begins in the afternoon, the storm clouds roll in, Santa Claus takes over our shops, the energy companies sting us for another 10%, we debate whether to eat or heat, and John Major joins the Marxists...

Welcome to winter!

But it's not all 'change and decay in all around we see'. Friends go on meeting, talking, thinking, writing. The Big Buzz we provoked with the formation of our Network by getting a theism/nontheism dialogue going continues to buzz away in *The Friend* and *Friends Quarterly* and in Local, Area and national meetings and conferences. Our book *Godless for God's Sake* is back on the bookstore shelves, and Friends (well, most Friends) have moved on from the 19<sup>th</sup> century 'Does God exist?' question to the 21<sup>st</sup> century enquiry 'What do we mean by God and God-language?' I may be wrong, but I sense that the backlash against nontheist Friends that was apparent in the suspicion voiced a year or so ago that we are 'entryists' worming our way into the Religious Society of Friends in order to subvert it from within is fast fading as Quakers are urged, in the words of the Whoosh! Conference epistle, to 'encourage others as they reach for the language that is right for them' as part of a process of acknowledging 'our need for experimentation and openness to change.'

In the last few weeks the Network has held its first regional conference, in the south, and been involved in workshops organised by the liaison committee of two Area meetings in the north. It will be involved again in a major meeting at Friends House, London, in January, to which members of all Area meetings have been invited, and it will partner the Progressive Christianity Network later next year in organising a national tour of England by Gretta Vosper, the best-selling 'post-theist' chair of Canada's PCN. And of course (top priority!) there's our national conference and AGM at Woodbrooke in March, where we hope to see you *all*! This Newsletter will be mostly taken up with reporting the past events and hopefully whetting your appetite for those to come.

## **Our first regional conference**

This took place at Chelmsford Quaker Meeting House on Saturday October 19 and was organised by Jean and Brian Wardrop. Twenty six people from Quaker meetings, the Sea of Faith (SoF) and the Progressive Christianity Network (PCN) attended. The subject was *Prayer Beyond Belief* and the keynote speaker was Michael Wright, media officer of PCN and a member of NFN's steering group. Barbara Richardson Todd reports:

Michael informed us of the Whoosh! epistle and how we were at a special time in Quaker history where much was changing: He quoted: *'Growing numbers of people have rejected all claims to absolute truth, but are hungry for a path of personal and social transformation. This could be a "transition moment" for British Quakers, as we discover a new radicalism in response to turbulent times* ([www.quaker.org.uk/whoosh-epistle-july-2012](http://www.quaker.org.uk/whoosh-epistle-july-2012)).

Quoting from Ben Pink Dandelion, John Macmurray, Lloyd Geering, Jack Spong and Gretta Vosper, Michael said that Christianity had to change and evolve with the scientific and technological evidence and communications of today. Our attitude of mind and way of living were more important than doctrine in the modern world. But where did that leave prayer?

Prayer, said Michael, traditionally consists of Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving and Supplication (ACTS) but these can be transformed into Awe, Concerns, Thankfulness and Self-Reflection. Michael told us that he has four objects which he keeps in his pocket to remind him of these: a stone reminds him of awe, the wonder of the environment, the marvellous structure of things like the human eye; Muslim prayer beads remind him to be concerned with the wider world, compassionate, caring and giving consideration; a mobile phone reminds him of technological advances, of his family and friends and all that he has to be thankful for; and a small piece of smooth wood helps Michael to remember to reflect on his words and actions, his shortcomings and honesty. (He carries only one of these prompts at any one time!).

We all need to make time to appreciate all that we too easily take for granted, said Michael. He told us that he adapted the spiritual exercises of Ignatius of Loyola into a structure which worked for him where he settled into a silence, reviewed the day's events with gratitude, paid attention to his emotions and reflected in greater depth on one particular aspect of the day. Michael also stated that he anticipated tomorrow with hope. I think we can all learn from this talk and take what Michael shared with us and use it in our own lives.

After lunch and a period of chat and networking, the afternoon sessions consisted of two workshops on the themes 'Godless prayer - impossible?' and 'Meeting for Worship - implausible for a nontheist?' The discussions in small groups were so lively that it was hard to get anyone to break for tea and cake! An excellent day, and many thanks to Michael and to Jean and Brian.

## North-West Friends Joint Liaison Committee annual conference

This was held on Saturday October 5 at Cockermouth Quaker Meeting House in Cumbria and I had the pleasure of attending as guest speaker and workshop facilitator. Our subject was the challenge and rewards of diversity in modern liberal Quakerism, with the title *Living on the Wave's Edge*, from *Quaker Faith and Practice, 20.06* – the Philip Rack quote which inspired our annual conference at Woodbrooke in March. In the morning I suggested there was nothing new about diversity in the Quaker movement, citing arguments and disputes from the 1650s onwards. We then looked at the range of diversity today, which led to a lively discussion on nontheism. After lunch we went round the circle, each of us sharing our own experience and understanding of where we find ourselves in the spectrum of religious opinion – an exercise which several Friends said they had never talked about openly before. 'Everyone found it a valuable experience', writes Catherine Williams, co-ordinator of the event. 'The sharing certainly deepened our sense of diversity and community.' We found ourselves united in the view that we all had the right to

express ourselves in the language that we feel is right for us, and all had the responsibility to respect the language of others, whether Christ-centred, Spirit-centred, theist or nontheist. We reminded ourselves that Quakers began as Seekers, and that when we think we have become finders we soon learn that what we have found is that there is still so much more to seek!

## Nontheism on Area Meetings' agenda

In a bold and important initiative, the Quaker Committee for Christian and Interfaith Relations (QCCIF) has invited all the Area Meetings in the country to nominate a representative to attend a special one-day conference at Friends House, London, designed to increase mutual awareness and understanding of different positions within BYM, with a **primary focus on nontheism**. QCCIF hopes to follow this with further events of a similar nature at the BYM Gathering in August next year, in which NFN has been invited to participate.

The London meeting at Friends House is on January 24, 10.30 to 4pm and the invited speakers are **Rex Ambler, Philip Gross and David Boulton**, who have been asked to address the theme ***Faith, what's God got to do with it?*** **Christine Davis** will chair the meeting.

This will be an important opportunity to share with Friends of different views our understanding of nontheism in a committed Quaker context, particularly as we understand that a record of the meeting will be distributed to AMs to encourage wider discussion. We have been told that there may be some vacancies if not all AMs nominate a representative, and **applications from Friends not officially appointed by AMs are invited** and will be placed on a waiting list. The conference fee is £50, with an early-bird discount of £10 for those who get their application in by October 31. (Just time for a quick telephone call!)

You may like to find out from your AM clerk whether a representative has been nominated and, if not, put your name forward. Or get your individual application off now and get yourself on the waiting list. The details:

**FRIENDS MEETING HOUSE, EUSTON ROAD, LONDON**

**10.30am to 4.00pm, January 25 2014**

**INFORMATION AND BOOKINGS:** [www.quaker.org.uk/qccirconf](http://www.quaker.org.uk/qccirconf) or **Graham Spackman**,  
[grahams@quaker.org.uk](mailto:grahams@quaker.org.uk) or **020 7663 021**.

## Our 2014 annual conference

... and with so much going on, don't forget our annual conference in March! We'll be moving out of our safety zone (?) to tackle nontheism not only in Quakerism but also in the mainstream churches and beyond. Our theme: **Nontheism among Quakers and Beyond**.

This should be our most ambitious and adventurous conference yet!

We kick off on the Friday evening with a keynote address by **Brian Mountford**, author of the best-selling book *Christian Atheist: Belonging without Believing*. Brian is vicar of the University Church and Fellow of St Hilda's College, Oxford, and his book 'validates the Christian atheist position within the broad spectrum of Christianity and says to the Church, you ignore this phenomenon at your peril, because the ground between atheist and religious adherent is a fertile source of meaning and value'.

On the Saturday morning we bring the focus back to our own Society, with **Paul Parker**, Recording Clerk of Britain Yearly Meeting, and **Helen Rowlands**, Woodbrooke's Head of Education, who will be jointly leading a session on the much talked-about Whoosh! Conference epistle. In accepting our invitation, Paul wrote: 'I value the Nontheist Friends Network as a part of the kaleidoscope of Quaker views and groups, and would be glad of the opportunity to meet with you.' The focus of the session is likely to be what we as nontheist Friends can contribute to the re-energising of our meetings. The Whoosh! epistle declares:

*'We discern a growing confidence within the Religious Society of Friends that our experience-based religion is increasingly what many people are looking for. Growing numbers of people have rejected all claims to absolute truth, but are hungry for a path of personal and social transformation. This could be a "transition moment" for British Quakers, as we discover a new radicalism in response to turbulent times.'*

On the Saturday afternoon we'll hold our AGM, where members take the Network's reins in their own hands, and after supper Frank Bonner will compere our popular 'Quaking with Laughter' evening. On Sunday morning I'll introduce a session taking us back to the 'Beyond' part of our title with a whirlwind tour of the wider interfaces of religion and humanism – "A walk on the wide side". Since this will be the last talk I'll be giving as the Network's convenor it will be an opportunity to look back on what might have been, and forward at what might yet be.

But it won't all be platform speakers. We plan to provide ample opportunities for open participation as we divide our time between the keynote presentations and creative small-group discussion where everyone will be empowered to share their experiences and make their own contribution to the conference themes.

All this, *and* the not-to-be-missed fabulous Woodbrooke experience.

Bookings have been slower than usual so far. (Yes, we know there's so much good stuff going on). But the next couple of months is when we expect a rush, so we do urge you to act now to secure your place.

**The dates: Friday March 21 to Sunday March 23, 2014**

**The place: Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre, Selly Oak, Birmingham**

**All-in fee for registration and full board: £195 per person (but read on for discounts)**

**For this year, and for the first time, we are offering a £10 discount for November/December bookings by senior citizens (over 65) and those not in full-time employment. (See also a discounted rate for membership, below). That brings down the cost for those eligible to £185.**

It helps if you can pay the full amount when making your booking, but a deposit of £50 is acceptable, the balance to be paid by December 1st 2013. Information on possible bursary assistance is available on request. Your fees will be reimbursed, less a £5 admin fee, if you have to cancel before December 1<sup>st</sup>. After December 1<sup>st</sup> we can only offer part-reimbursement or none at all, depending on how close your cancellation is to the conference date and whether we are able to re-let your room.

We expect to be able to offer a few non-resident places to Friends living within easy travelling distance from Woodbrooke, or who would prefer to stay with friends or relatives. But we don't know the charges yet, so look out for details in our next Newsletter, probably in January.

**HOW TO BOOK RESIDENT PLACES?** Cheques made payable to Nontheist Friends Network and marked on the back 'WB2014' should be sent to **Jean Wardrop, 105 Humber Road, Chelmsford, Essex CM1 7PG**. Be sure to advise Jean of any special needs (diet, ground floor accommodation, etc). Please do *not* contact Woodbrooke direct, as they will only refer you back to us. (And please remember to sign your cheque! You'd be surprised how many Friends don't!)

So we eagerly look forward to hearing from you, and seeing you there! Get it done now, before you forget! Meanwhile, keep in touch via our website, [www.nontheist-quakers.org.uk](http://www.nontheist-quakers.org.uk) and, if you are a signed-up member, share your comments and ideas on our email forum, [quaker-nontheists@yahogroups.com](mailto:quaker-nontheists@yahogroups.com)

Speaking of **membership**, please note that if you still haven't got round to renewing your 2013-14 membership, or joining for the first time, you can put that right by taking advantage of our **half-price rate of £10** for the remaining period between now and our March 21<sup>st</sup> AGM. About twenty of you who took out membership in 2012 haven't yet renewed, and we'd really like to hear from you, either to renew or tell us why you've chosen not to. Cheques to our **membership secretary Miriam Branson, 6 James Street, Kinver, W. Midlands DY7 6ED**, made out to Nontheist Friends Network. Don't ask what the Network can do for you, but what you can do for the Network – namely keep us solvent, active, and a place where nontheist Friends don't have to hide their light under a bushel.

## A note on Qf&p revision

Your steering group has discussed whether it should offer proposals for any forthcoming revision of Quaker faith and practice. It agreed the text of the following letter to The Friend, following concerns expressed by a previous correspondent that nontheists might seek to exclude God-language in the next edition.

*On behalf of the steering group of the Nontheist Friends Network I would like to reassure Carol and those who share her concern that we have no intention whatever of seeking to impose nontheist*

*language. We agree with her when she asks 'how can we possibly consider writing God out?' Of course it would be absurd to bowdlerise George Fox and early Friends by deleting their theistic language: the anthology sections of Qf&p, written in the language of their time, are a precious part of our common Quaker heritage.*

*What we hope a revision might accomplish is what every previous revision has accomplished, namely that any new edition speaks afresh to a new generation, reflecting the dynamics of change to which our Society, like every other group, is inevitably subject. Over the last thirty years the Religious Society of Friends has become more theologically diverse, more accepting of views that challenge traditional understandings of 'God' and 'the Spirit' as transcendental realities. We simply hope that any revision of our inspirational writings will reflect this greater diversity, without in any way devaluing tried and tested Quaker language.*

*Be assured, Friends, that the Nontheist Friends Network is not in the business of trying to write the God word out of Quaker life!*

## Changes ahead

Two minutes recording recent steering group decisions:

**15.10.13 (1):** *The steering group has discussed changes in the way it operates and has agreed the following points:*

- 1. That, effective from the 2014 AGM, the role of Convenor be laid down and replaced by that of Clerk.*
- 2. That the role of Clerk be defined by the group in a formal Roles and Responsibilities minute.*

*It is envisaged that roles and responsibilities currently undertaken by the Convenor will be split between the Clerk and members of the group.*

**15.10.13 (2):** *The steering group has agreed that the NFN will partner the Progressive Christianity Network in organising a British tour by Gretta Vosper, chair of the Canadian PCN, in September 2014. The NFN will have primary responsibility for organising Gretta's meeting in Manchester, at Mount Street meeting house, on September 23. NFN's financial obligations have been defined by agreement between PCN and the NFN treasurer. Michael Wright and David Boulton are members of the joint planning group. Michael Wright, Maureen Tinsley and Sarah Richards will work with others to arrange the Newcastle events.*

## ...and finally

New Zealander Lloyd Geering, who has been an inspiration to many of us for many years, celebrated his 95<sup>th</sup> birthday last month at the New Zealand Sea of Faith conference. I was asked to send a birthday message and took the opportunity to include congratulations from friends in our Network, Sea of Faith and Progressive Christianity Network:

*95? 95? Come off it, Lloyd! Pull the other one! All I ever see, in every book and lecture you produce, is a new, new Lloyd Geering, offering new, new ideas, new, new interpretations, and new, new ways of inspiring and energising the rest of us. I wish this mere 78-year-old could be with you at what sounds like a great New*

Zealand Sea of Faith conference, and at the joyful noise which will no doubt resound throughout your birthday party.

Lloyd, I don't know how you do it, but by all the gods that don't exist, I swear you do it! For two thirds or more of your long, long life you have written and spoken with courage, passion, clarity, humour and dazzling originality, telling the new, new story of Jesus, the new, new story of God, the new, new story of a progressive, humanist Christianity. We honour and thank you for it. One day, I guess, you'll learn to grow old disgracefully – but clearly not yet.

Your party will be a holy communion of friends, admirers, followers and devout sceptics. I'll join you from the far side of the world with a communion cup of wine and a wafer-thin slice of birthday cake.

From me, on behalf of all your friends in UK Sea of Faith, UK Progressive Christianity Network and UK Friends Nontheist Network, *Happy 95<sup>th</sup> birthday, Lloyd – and here's to the next 95 years in which your work will surely endure!*

### Next Newsletter January

*In friendship*  
*David Boulton*  
*Convenor*

#### *Your steering group:*

Frank Bonner: Frank Bonner: [bonnfrank@gmail.com](mailto:bonnfrank@gmail.com)

David Boulton, Convenor and Newsletter editor: [dboultondent@btinternet.com](mailto:dboultondent@btinternet.com) or Hobsons Farm,  
Cowgill, Dent, Sedbergh, Cumbria LA10 5RF

Miriam Branson, Membership Secretary: [miriam.branson@waitrose.com](mailto:miriam.branson@waitrose.com) or 6 James Street, Kinver, W.  
Midlands DY7 6ED

Sarah Richards: [sarahrchds@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:sarahrchds@yahoo.co.uk)

Maureen Tinsley, Treasurer: [tinsleymaureen@virginmedia.com](mailto:tinsleymaureen@virginmedia.com) or 9 Allingham Court,  
Newcastle-upon-Tyne NE7 7FD

Jean Wardrop, Email Forum organiser: [jean@wardrop.org.uk](mailto:jean@wardrop.org.uk) or 105 Humber Road, Chelmsford, Essex  
CM1 7PG

Michael Wright: [michaelwright80@virginmedia.com](mailto:michaelwright80@virginmedia.com)

Michael Yates: [mich\\_chris@btinternet.com](mailto:mich_chris@btinternet.com)