

Michael Wright reports on a recent gathering at the Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre in Birmingham

Last year Meeting for Sufferings set up a Book of Discipline Revision Preparation Group (RPG) and asked it to do some preparatory work intended to help Britain Yearly Meeting (BYM) discern whether a revision should be made of *Quaker faith & practice*. The RPG has encouraged British Friends to read *Quaker faith & practice* month by month to become more familiar with it. No decision has yet been made to revise our book of discipline. Sufferings consulted Area Meetings as to the issues that need to be addressed in thinking about whether or not a revision is necessary. The subject that emerged from this consultation at the top of the list was that of theism/nontheism.

In February twenty-five Friends from across Britain Yearly Meeting were invited to the Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre to help explore the issue. They had a wide range of views on the subjects and their ages ranged from under thirty to over eighty. Those participating were asked to address the question:

Can we reframe current Quaker theological conversation so that we don't get stuck in the polarizing shorthand of 'theism/nontheism'?

In some Meetings the issue of theism/nontheism does not appear to be much of a problem. In others, the issue is sometimes 'the elephant in the room', as Friends of different outlooks either challenge others with their views, or studiously avoid talking about God and other theological matters as far as possible.

Internet exchange

Since last September, Friends in this 'think tank' have been exploring aspects of the question by means of an internet exchange, to get to know each other's backgrounds and experiences, and share some ideas.

The event at Woodbrooke allowed us to engage intensively with the question. We began by working with an 'Open Space' process to construct the agenda for the consultation. This enabled everyone present to flag up the particular topics that they felt were important in trying to get to a less polarised reframing of the issue.

Friends worked in a variety of small groups, over that weekend, at subjects such as what emotional baggage each of us brings to this issue, and whether there are other polarities of contrasting viewpoints among Friends. Other topics included how much we care about what earlier generations of Quakers thought, or said, or believed and how we relate to their concerns.

More than one group talked about the language of theism, nontheism and post-theism. Other groups considered what processes might help us with understanding each other's experiences, using some creative ways of doing so. These included a four-dimensional model of describing our religious/spiritual experiences, interpreting them with help from the insights of Eckhart von Hochheim as interpreted by Matthew Fox.

Some techniques used with worship sharing were also considered: Godly Play, Philosophy for Children, and other forms of creative work. Using words such as 'life, nourishment and heritage' helped some Friends develop metaphors that made deeper their awareness and understanding of one another.

We questioned what the Book of Discipline is for – and some of us asked for any revision to be renamed the Book of Discipleship.

Personal experiences

There were seventeen different groups – each of which lasted seventy-five minutes. After each group had finished one of its members wrote an account of the fruits of each discussion, which was then available for everyone else to read.

In these reports we were reminded of two sentences in the introduction to *Advices & queries* that seemed to summarise our whole discussion:

Friends maintain that expressions of faith must be related to personal experiences... The deeper realities of our faith are beyond precise verbal formulation and our way of worship based on silent waiting testifies to this.

We came to realise that there were important connections between us all. As we explored our different perspectives and views we came to appreciate how interconnected our experiences are. We were all committed to really listening to one another and seeking to

understand perspectives on this issue that are not our own. As we listened, many of us came to appreciate how similar experiences can be expressed in different words.

We all sought to move away from the concept of views at contrasting ends of a theological line. Some felt a strong desire for new language but others were sceptical. One Friend said he used different words in different contexts.

A number acknowledged that of those for whom God is important, none had an idea of the divine that resembled the anthropomorphic figure featured in so many traditional hymns, which many of us brought from our pre-Quaker experience. Such concepts confuse or seem inadequate.

Equally, we were urged to continually strip away our comfort blankets, to hear the dissonant voices that challenge us towards new understandings and insights. It was clear that among us the 'point' of Quakerism remains personal and social transformation.

A distinctive Quaker approach to God

We wondered if there is a distinctive Quaker approach to God and were encouraged to explore discussions on this subject focused on sharing our experiences, rather than our speculative theological ideas. Seeking the 'Light within' requires us to use a practical discipline of listening, understanding, waiting for unity, committing to an agreed minute and then acting on the truth gained in this way.

Some Friends committed themselves to stop using the term 'theism' – few Friends actually describe themselves as theists. Those who describe themselves as 'nontheists' learned how deeply significant the name God can be to many Friends, and others gained a clearer concept of some aspects of these nontheist concerns. There was a broad welcome for the statement: 'I trust in something I don't fully understand.'

The opening sentences of *Advices & queries* 17 are:

Do you respect that of God in everyone though it may be expressed in unfamiliar ways or be difficult to discern? Each of us has a particular experience of God and each must find a way to be true to it.

One group offered a rewritten version of this:

Do you respect that everyone has truths which may be expressed in different ways? Can we celebrate our different experiences and the way we express them? Seek to understand and explore language and other ways that help this. Do not allow the strength of your truths today to stop you from hearing others, or exploring yours tomorrow.

We shared a longing for all Friends to feel safe in having potentially uncomfortable conversations with Friends who describe their experiences differently, as we did that weekend. We hope the RPG will decide to develop some of the ways in which we found ourselves able to share together and encourage them to be more widely used throughout BYM.

There was a strong desire to encourage Friends throughout BYM to explore further what core Quaker practices, experiences and witness offer us. The group asked RPG to consider how this might best be done and offered them some ideas.

It was suggested that Friends in Britain have been largely avoiding theological conversations for more than thirty years and that we could all benefit if we engage sensitively, in a Quakerly and disciplined way, to listen, to try to understand one another better, to cherish what we have in common and to focus on our experiences.

Is it possible to reframe our different perspectives so as to be less polarised? My impression was that we all came away from the weekend feeling we could see ways of doing so, and some already had.