

Linda Murgatroyd's presentation.

Responding to Change.

Under this title, Linda, of Kingston & Wandsworth AM and co-clerk of the Quaker Arts Network, developed an extended metaphor of gardening to explore the possible future development of Quakers in Britain. She argued that to some extent our future depends on us now, and on how we address change: do we see it as an opportunity or a threat, or ignore it altogether? In particular she invited Friends to consider how Permaculture principles might be useful to Friends in responding to issues that are likely to affect our Society.

Notes for her talk have been sent to conference participants but Linda didn't feel they were in a form that was suitable for publication on the website.

David Parlett has summarised the talk for his article in *The Friend* as follows:

"Linda adopted a metaphorical approach by considering ways in which we could work towards a desirable position in 2032 by following the 12 principles of permaculture, defined as "thinking tools, that when used together, allow us to creatively re-design our environment and our behaviour in a world of less energy and resources". She backed this by drawing attention to statistics on trends in religion in Britain and Jennifer Hampton's *British Quaker Survey: examining religious beliefs and practices in the 21st Century*."

A brief 'boiled down' version of Linda's presentation is as follows, which probably doesn't do it justice – especially with regard to details!

Linda introduced the 12 principles of permaculture, which are also observed in many traditional societies (David Holmgren: *Permaculture: Principles and Pathways Beyond Sustainability*), and asked us to consider how they might help Friends shape our future:

1. Observe and interact

Do we notice what's going on in our own community and the wider world, for example in terms of religious belief and affiliations, cultural, social and ecological change. How well-informed are we? How do we interact with the wider world and respond to changes there?

2. Catch and store energy

Do we give sufficient priority to investing in our personal spiritual resources and practical skills? How can the proper use of Quaker processes (eg nominations and eldership) develop Friends, so that newer Friends gain experience with the support of more experienced ones?

3. Obtain a yield

Is what we are doing nurturing us, or is it draining our time, energy and spiritual

resources? Do we have our priorities right? (Property, trusteeship, admin?). Are we prepared to lay things down - as individuals and community? Changing our personal roles and reviewing our priorities can give new energy .

4. Apply self-regulation and accept feedback

Do we take Advices and Queries seriously, including those that may be discomforting? Are we willing to recognise when we are part of the problem and able truly to be open to new Light and the transforming power of Love?

5. Use and value renewable resources and services

Is everyone in our community offered a way to make a contribution? Regarding nominations, can we find roles for people, not only people for roles? How might people contribute in new ways: mentoring, listening, reviewing publications, helping discernment? This may mean redesigning roles. Are we aware of the spiritual resources around us? Eg ecumenical ones? How fruitfully do we engage with our 'neighbours'.

6. Produce no waste

If something (a meeting, a project) is not thriving, are we prepared to lay it down in love, and learn from it rather than throw good money/energy after bad? This doesn't preclude renewal/revival if things change. Money should probably not be our prime measure of value!

7. Design from patterns to details

We are all experts in our own experience, but as a community we need to look more widely and see how our Meetings and Society are part of a bigger picture, which is changing. Linda presented a wealth of detail and statistics on changes in religious identity from sources including the British Quaker Survey 2013, Quaker annual tabular statements and the British Social Attitudes Survey. From being a stable community, with a majority being birthright Friends, we are now a community of people joining at different times of life, and bringing with them a range of skills, experience and expectations. Though our numbers have fallen, they are holding up well compared with most religious groups (especially mainstream Christianity).

Half of the population of Britain today have no religion. Demographically, people are having families later, and black and Asian families have more children than white people. Numbers of Asian and Mixed race people are expected to double between 2011 and 2031, as they are a younger population.

Linda encouraged us to research how our own meetings compare both to other Quaker meetings and to local populations and to reflect on our findings.

8. Integrate rather than segregate

If we put the right things in the right place, supportive relationships will develop between them.

We have a shared vision in "Our Faith in the Future" . Do we understand and use our structures effectively to allow the Spirit to guide us as a community?

Are we clear about our shared priorities, including prioritising key appointments?

Are we letting language, personal hopes or history get in the way of proper spirit-led discernment which will bring us into unity?

9. Use small and slow solutions

Do we give right priority to wide appreciation of roles such as eldership, oversight, clerking or group facilitation, and to developing such skills?

Small and slow systems are easier to maintain than big ones, make better use of local resources and produce more sustainable outcomes. Might a strategy be called for which nurtures seeds that are already growing, especially if they have intrinsic challenges (eg age turnover/geography)?

Should we consider more active nurturing of non-geographic and special interest Quaker groups?

10. Use and value diversity

Diversity reduces vulnerability to a variety of threats, allowing us to take advantage wider range of skills and experience and helping us respond constructively to external change.

Do we welcome people to our meetings effectively, especially if we feel they are “not like us”. Do we need to learn more about the cultures of other faiths and communities in our area?

Can we find open questions to ask, and do we listen to the answers?

Do we try to react openly to the unfamiliar and to treasure a diversity of spiritual language as well as of experience.

11. Use edges and value the marginal

The interface between things is where the most interesting events take place. These are often the most valuable, diverse and productive elements in a system.

An edge has two sides:

- Among Quakers, who are the ones ‘on the edge’ Quakers? They may consider themselves Quakers but not go regularly to Meeting, or they may be part of a non-geographic quaker community. They may not be recognised as Quakers or feature as respondents to Quaker surveys.
(Here Linda expanded on ‘who are the marginal Quakers’ at some length with a dozen different reasons why some might be or feel marginal and what our response might be).
- Who are the potential Quakers who haven’t yet found us or who don’t feel comfortable among us? Let’s not be blinded by stereotypes; can we “enter imaginatively into the life and witness “of people who enquire about Quakerism, as well as learning about other faiths? (cf Advice 6)

Linda encouraged us not to be shy in sharing our Quaker experience: it’s a gift that grows as it is shared!

12. Creatively use and respond to change

In a situation of change, we can have a positive impact by first carefully observing without judgment, but with an open mind, and by then intervening at the right time.

Do we nurture imagination as well as practicality? In our outreach, might it be helpful sometimes to specifically address those seeking spiritual nurture (eg through the arts) or those who share our values (truth, peace, sustainability, equality...) outside of organised religion?

Linda also reminded us of some characteristics of 'Thriving spirit-led organisations' (Margaret Benefiel - "Soul at Work"), i.e :

- They have a clear purpose with which all unite (Quakers' is might be: Holding spaces for the Spirit to act on and through us, and building a community based on following leadings of love and truth - which might be expressed by some of us as "the rule of God")
- Recruitment is based on values (we have a membership process that does this)
- They use a decision-making process in which all can participate and which includes a time of not-knowing. This enables decisions to relate to the purpose of the organisation.

Linda suggested that on this basis, Quakers in Britain are in a very good place, provided that we use our discernment processes properly.

Finally, after quoting George Fox's 1656 letter to ministers from Launceston Gaol, (QFP 19.32) Linda concluded with:

'Let's keep living in worship-filled spaces, listening to the leadings of love and truth, and doing our best to follow them.'

'Sustainability is the biggest challenge that everyone needs to keep addressing at some level - and if we can be open to guidance and follow it, (on this and other issues) we will be empowered in surprising ways. This path brings life and love and community and joy.'