

Senior Conference Epistle 2016

To all Friends everywhere,

From 20th to 27th August 2016, 82 Friends aged 15-18 and 11 adult volunteers gathered at Sibford School in Oxfordshire. Together, the theme 'Living in Ministry' was discussed.

To begin considering the theme, we embarked on an introductory session using the medium of chat rooms. In small groups we discussed questions within the theme such as 'Is ministry exclusive to Quakerism?' and 'Where does ministry come from?'. This revealed huge diversity in people's own experiences of ministry, many never having had the confidence to minister aloud in Meeting for Worship before.

Mark Russ, one of our visiting speakers, gave us an insight into his own interpretation of ministry. He considered ministry to be an inward movement of spirituality within the meeting and testimony to be the outward manifestation of beliefs. He spoke of a time in his life where he felt dissatisfaction with Sunday Meeting for Worship and how he felt more spiritually fed at Young Friends General Meeting, finding the community more enriching and particularly enjoying the concept of food sharing. Particularly poignant to young Friends was Mark's correlation between embracing his sexuality and becoming more open to the working of the Spirit. Once this barrier had been removed, Mark described experiencing 'nudges' from God to become a priest which led him into his current job as Nurturing Friends and Meetings Tutor at Woodbrooke where he has the opportunity to lead worship. Here, he feels he can fulfil his calling whilst maintaining his Quaker faith. He spoke of the 'priesthood of all believers' and how we are all entitled to minister and are responsible for upholding the meeting.

Sam, Justine and Elfie joined us from Grow Heathrow to talk about direct action and how they used their gifts to campaign creatively against climate change and the proposed new runway at Heathrow Airport. They helped to challenge our misconceptions of activism and described it as 'not always scary and violent but quite fluffy'. This session reminded us of Advices and Queries 35 'Respect the laws of the state but let your first loyalty be to God's purpose' showing us that living in ministry can sometimes mean going beyond the constraints of the law.

Their friendly personalities and depictions of Grow Heathrow as a creative, community space of music and friendship also prompted us to reconsider our perception of people who take direct action. Their active and dynamic session gave us the opportunity to try the non-violent tactics used during their protests and Young Friends left feeling inspired to be less fearful of taking direct action. Justine's message, that when you live a life in ministry you may experience a greater sense of fulfilment, particularly resonated with many participants.

David Gee's session was underpinned by a similar message to Justine's that when you live life abundantly, you live life more fully. David interpreted the phrase 'living in ministry' as

living with a commitment to truth and bringing that of God within yourself into the world around you. He also said that living in ministry can be an unsettling and disturbing experience, especially when your convictions conflict with the way the world works. Conferees revelled in the invitation to question the grey areas in the peace testimony and he replied honestly that he would stick to his commitment to non-violence until proven otherwise.

Three brave adult volunteers answered questions put forward by participants, spanning spiritual experiences to most embarrassing moments and the best and worst days of their lives. Huw Still, Ruth Jesson-Smith and Sally Oliver all spoke of their fond memories at Senior Conference and, like Mark Russ and Sam, how they found a greater sense of religious community at young Quaker events than at many other times in their life. This prompted them to return as members of the adult volunteer team and made us appreciate how lucky we are to have been a part of this Senior Conference legacy. This emotional session was full of laughter and tears, but ultimately it highlighted the commonalities between everyone at this event no matter the age or person.

Twice a day we gathered in worshipful silence to help us reflect and enjoy periods of calm during this busy week. The weather allowed for a warm outdoor prologue in the morning sunshine which was greatly appreciated by conferees as an opportunity to be closer to nature during our worship. In Meetings for Worship much ministry was heard about starting new chapters in their lives regarding GCSE results, going to university and leaving home for the first time. Participants spoke of finding hope and courage during this week that they could keep with them on their journeys forward.

Our Entertainments Committee provided a spectacular array of activities across the event where people felt comfortable to express themselves uninhibitedly. Open Mic revealed the strong sense of community felt throughout the week showcasing the incredible talent of conferees with unplanned music, comedy and storytelling. The Base Group Challenge tested us mentally and physically and brought us closer together as we became reliant on our team mates to help us through the many obstacles and puzzles we faced. The disco on the penultimate night also gave us an opportunity to unwind and get creative with our Hippy vs Hipster outfits.

Conference has once again proved itself to be an exceptional space in our lives, memories of which we will carry forward throughout the year. The week has been upheld by a sense of calm with strong friendships forming across different ages and social groups. Like Mark's concept of individual gifts, this extraordinary community has been created by each conferee's unique talents. Whether our gifts lie in verbal ministry or not, each one of us has something special to offer and we have a shared responsibility to uphold one another.

Signed in and on behalf of Senior Conference

Alice O and Freya H, Clerks