

Senior Conference Epistle 2014

To all Friends everywhere,

From the 16th to the 23rd of August 2014, 83 young Friends aged 15 to 18 and 13 adult volunteers aged over 22 came together at Sibford School, Oxfordshire. Here, we considered the theme of 'Finding A Way', a topic we found to be particularly relevant to many of us at this stage in our lives.

We began the week with an afternoon of chat rooms and spiritual exploration of the theme, in which we were able to engage with a variety of aspects in smaller groups. Not only did this provoke an initial discussion of the theme, but also encouraged a wide and open level of interaction amongst conferees. These were found to be a both spiritually and intellectually broadening experience, which provided us with a solid foundation for the week ahead.

To aid us in our spiritual journey we received visits from two external speakers, the first of which was Police Officer John Allen. Raised by a Quaker and an Anglican Priest, he shared with us his complex journey through life from adoption to his current occupation and explained the various influences and events that made him who he is today. Many commented on the reassurance and hope his session gave to us, as it demonstrated that life gives you more than one chance to find happiness.

Our second external speaker, Rob Bell, shared with us his own incredible path. Having lived through an extremely difficult childhood and subsequent difficulties with substance abuse, he has found personal and social contentment in his work helping those in similar situations. His honesty and openness were inspiring and his message about the importance of support and communication was simple but powerful. During his base group visits there was the opportunity to ask him additional questions, the answers to which people found very helpful.

The powerful message of the importance of trust was emphasised during the 22+ speaker session. Huw Still talked about the lessons learned cycling from York to Iran and the hospitality of those he encountered along the way. Morgan McHale-Dill's account of her time at school and university resonated somewhat with John Allen's message that if things don't work out first time there are many routes to finding a sense of fulfillment and satisfaction in life. The session was concluded by Maggie Foyer's account and explanation of her experiences and understanding of the situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territories and Israel. She drew an insightful parallel with her previous experience in apartheid South Africa illustrating how both situations show the results of fear and demonstrate a lack of the understanding and trust that previous speakers had shown to be of such importance.

We were brought together in silent worship twice a day during Prologue and Epilogue. This year participants were encouraged to not only stand and minister but to record

their thoughts and feelings in notebooks provided by the Elders during morning worship. Many, some of whom may not have had the confidence to minister vocally, took this opportunity and provided us with some insightful words as well as poems and artwork. These periods of stillness amongst a busy schedule allowed for personal contemplation of the week's events.

Base Groups offered structure and support as we gathered in small close-knit groups to discuss the theme and sessions more deeply, as well as lots of time for fun and games. These groups of Friends, supported by Base Group Facilitators, created a safe space that allowed friendships to form. The fancy-dress meal offered us an evening of creativity, as groups of Cluedo characters, cartoons and fish fingers ate alongside famous musicians and pirates.

The 22+ team provided a range of workshops that ran once a day for the majority of the event and deepened the sense of community. These ranged from 'The Meaning of Life' to 'Awesome Art' and 'Tea and Text' to 'Circus Skills' and included, of course, 'Mmmm Snacks'. We were fortunate enough to be visited by Susie Tombs who ran an Experiment with Light session twice, once as part of the Meaning of Life workshop and once independently. The workshops provoked interesting debate and provided relaxing entertainment.

Every day we were treated to evenings of entertainment planned by our 'Ents'. Ice breaking games on the first evening helped create space for more adventurous activities including a scavenger hunt, base group challenge and a demanding quiz. Friendships were allowed to flourish during free time and the kind nature of the group was demonstrated by the generosity of secret friend gifts throughout the week. This was particularly evident after our mid-week trip to Oxford. Whilst there we were welcomed at Oxford Meeting House and spent a lovely day in the town centre. Later on in the week participants took the opportunity to express themselves with a welcoming open-mic night and fun-filled night of entertainments on the last night. A highlight of the week was the bouncy castle on GCSE results day, where participants could relieve stress and generally have fun.

We feel that Senior Conference has been a week of personal exploration, one that has left us with lessons and experiences applicable to many areas in life. We have gathered memories here that will stay with us, of laughter, of friendship and of experiences that will hopefully aid us in finding our way.

Signed on behalf of all at Senior Conference,

Alice Bailey and Luke Stamper
Clerks