

To all Friends everywhere,

From 18th to 25th August 2018, 84 Friends aged 15-18 and 13 adult volunteers gathered at Sibford School in Oxfordshire to consider the theme of 'From Beliefs to Action,' exploring the different journeys that Friends can take to put their beliefs into practice.

Throughout the week, participants spent time in 'base groups,' small groups of eight or nine young people, which provided structure and continuity, as well as enabling new friendships to be formed. These bonds were strengthened by the 'Base Group Challenge,' where the groups competed in team building games, including a blindfolded obstacle course. Friendships created within base groups helped integrate newcomers into Senior Conference's loving and supportive atmosphere, and provided a safe space for us to express ourselves.

James Bewsher spoke to us about how his Quaker beliefs led him to join the RAF, and how his opinion changed from holding strong anti-war beliefs as a teenager to later joining the military. A sniper attack on a soldier in Northern Ireland led James to reflect on what he had done to 'wage peace,' and he felt that he could best achieve this in the air force. James spoke about his desire to actively promote peace, as opposed to doing nothing, and his influence helping to change attitudes within the military, for example by speaking out against restrictions on homosexuality. After the attacks on the World Trade Center, James felt that the nature of NATO actions moved away from defending the weak through UN peace support operations to being based on a desire for revenge, and so he left the forces. He spoke about his experience of feeling forced out of a local meeting for many years by verbal abuse, and the prejudice he faced from some in the Quaker community, as opposed to them challenging his choices. James' talk stimulated discussion in base groups, both on the decisions that he made and the lack of tolerance for these decisions within a society that prides itself on not having a set creed.

Our next speaker session involved a unique opportunity to explore the theme further with the play 'Digging the Dirt' performed by the Multi Story Theatre Company. The play wove together two fictionalised events of those who stood up for what they believed in: one of people digging the common land during the English Civil War and one of a modern-day whistle-blower who stood up against a government agency in the run-up to the invasion of Iraq. In contrast to James' session, this play highlighted the impact of those working outside the system against prevailing notions, as opposed to working from within in the 'pledge for peace'. Gill Nathanson and Bill Buffery's aim in creating the play was to take an issue that was 'bugging them about the world' and initiate a debate, as well as to compare the effects of individual and group action. Conferees asked thought-provoking and insightful questions about the origins of the stories within the play and how they developed from the initial idea, as well as engaging in the underpinning message.

We had two sessions run by our adult volunteer team, beginning on Tuesday with an 'Any Questions?' panel featuring four of its members, answering questions ranging from 'what has been your most intense emotional experience?' to 'would you rather boil to death in orange juice or milk?' We heard many stories, both serious and trivial, and the truthful and powerful answers of the adult volunteers helped to strengthen the bond between them and the participants. A second adult volunteer session to close the week on Friday saw two of the team share their personal reflections on the theme. Bryher Bowness discussed the idea of moving from actions to belief, and how small and everyday actions can make a significant difference. She talked about needing a belief in our own self-worth in order to help others. To achieve this, we created our own '5 a day' of small things we can do to support our mental health. Bryher also discussed the impact that sports can have, using the example of the Skid Row Running Club, which provided discipline and dignity to ex-prisoners and

homeless people living in Skid Row. Huw Still spoke about his decision to put his beliefs into action through donating a kidney. He described his journey, from an initial urge to donate to using a Meeting for Clearness to discern what his motivations were for doing so. He described this action as his 'calling', and discussed the nature of action as ministry. Conferees found this session motivating and moving, and valued an emphasis on the worth of everyday actions.

Our Entertainments Committee organised an exciting array of social events, which were enjoyed by the conferees. Our open mic night showcased the wide-ranging talents of participants, with story telling and songs ranging from ballads to Bob the Builder. As always, this brought participants closer together, with emotional and personal ministry being shared in that evening's epilogue. The main 'Ents' event on Friday night showcased more performances from participants and from all the base groups, including music, magic and comedy. A themed meal saw base groups' original takes on fancy dress, from the French Revolution to The Incredibles. The work required to put these ideas into practice brought our groups closer, and the 'Univision' themed disco gave us a chance to let our hair down after GCSE results day with music ranging from the 1970s to the modern day.

This year's Senior Conference, as always, has given us a space to reflect on our own lives and choices. Our prologues and epilogues were particularly special, bringing us all together twice a day in shared silence. Through worship, discussion and art we have come to realise that there are many paths we can take to live our beliefs. As Friends we share a common vision and purpose, and are strengthened by the diversity of the actions that we can take to stimulate these beliefs in others and turn them into reality. This event has created and strengthened ties between us, through a week of friendship, love, laughter and support.

Signed in and on behalf of Senior Conference 2018,

Freya Martin and Matt Ward-Perkins

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