

## SENIOR CONFERENCE EPISTLE 2019

Between the 17<sup>th</sup> and the 24<sup>th</sup> of August 2019, 83 young Friends aged 15 to 18 and 15 adult volunteers gathered at Sibford Boarding School near Banbury to explore the theme, 'Quakers in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: What will our Chapter be?'. Over the week we sought to find answers to this question via speaker sessions, chatrooms and base group discussion.

On the first day, we listened to a talk from Matt Alton, a young adult Quaker, who shared with us a personal and relatable introduction to the theme. As well as talking about his own experiences of young Quaker events - with pictures included - he presented the results of research carried out last year in which he spoke to 60 young adult Quakers from around the country. This highlighted what these young Quakers thought about Quakerism today and what they wanted it to look like in the future. A puzzle box analogy was used to demonstrate how Quakerism is 'wrapped in layers of delicate rules'. Although the box looked easy to open on the outside, it required a specific sequence of movements in order to 'obtain the divine contents'. The analogy also pointed out that what is inside the box is not necessarily for everybody, adding that Quakerism is not **the** answer, but only **an** answer.

On the second day, we engaged with our next speaker Susanna Mattingly, as she showed us a glimpse through the use of videos and stories of what other young Quakers around the world were doing in the next chapters of their life, particularly in the fight against climate change. As she illustrated just how important it was for us all as Quakers to work together on this issue, it reaffirmed the fact that this was going to be a part of our next chapter too, whether we liked it or not. Startling statistics originating from the Paris Agreement showed that us Quakers, alongside the whole global community, have to work harder, even past the agreement's original guidelines, to be more sustainable in our own lives. It also showed that we as global citizens need to campaign for political institutions to take more action on this issue. This needs to be done in order to guarantee a future for not only our generation, but for those beyond our years as well.

A great effort was undertaken to build strong bonds between participants within the conference throughout the week. This included many participant-led base group sessions throughout each day, including a base group challenge, which sought to bring each participant closer to their group. In the midst of what was a busy timetable, these sessions offered a chance for participants to relax and play games, but also provided a smaller and more private space to discuss the theme and other issues. A

sense of love and togetherness was also fostered through a 'secret friend' system, which gave participants the opportunity to give gifts anonymously, enhancing the overall community experience. The relationship between participants and adult volunteers was also developed in a session titled 'Any Questions', where we were given insights into such topics ranging from favourite song lyrics to overcoming difficult situations, dotted with a few embarrassing moments.

Towards the end of the week we heard from our last speaker, Adwoa Bittle. In her own chapter of being a young Friend, she had seen the diversity of Quakerism through pilgrimages and national gatherings. From her experiences in the Revisions Preparations Group, which suggested changes to the Book of Discipline, she was able to give us an idea of what needed adding to the book. This included statements/advice on climate change, mental health and assisted dying. As young people, we asked ourselves and each other what we thought was lacking in the text. Some answers included bridging the age gap present amongst the Quaker community and further LGBTQ+ inclusion. Our opinions on the use of religious language within Quakerism were also discussed, as we were asked to write down words that we never/sometimes/always used to connote God. Some of us were surprised to find that the same words had been placed in all the spaces, signifying the diversity within Quakers in their relationship to the more traditional Christian influences, which can sometimes be seen as a restrictive weakness. However, the value of diverse experiences that it brings cannot be understated within the faith.

Many other fun activities also took place throughout the event. This included an Open Mic', which hosted performances ranging from comedy to music, as well as a disco. The participants also had their investigative skills tested, as they were tasked with hunting the committee who were hiding around the main building. One of the biggest events in the week was the annual trip to Oxford, which allowed us to meet up with Junior Gathering in a Meeting for Worship. This also gave us an opportunity to prepare as base groups for the themed meal later that day, which showcased spies, and re-enactments of the Wizard of Oz and Romeo and Juliet to name but a few. The entertainments on the final night displayed performances by base groups, comedic acts and fortune telling. Through all the laughs, it succeeded in bringing all of the participants together, in what would for some be their final ever night at Senior Conference.

By the end of the week, we felt as if we had a better understanding within ourselves of what will come next for Quakerism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. There was a general affirmation towards wanting to fight harder against climate

change, and to promote further inclusivity within the faith. But perhaps most of all, it is necessary to give further definition to Quakerism, especially for newcomers, whilst still retaining the diversity of beliefs that makes the faith what it is. It is clear, even in circles outside of Quakerism, that we live in a fractured world where division and conflict are constantly challenging humanity and its ideals. It is up to us as young Quakers to live out our ideals for the future, and project outwardly the truth that we have **an** answer.

Signed in and on behalf of Senior Conference 2019,

Jess K and Paris W - Clerks