

Leighton Park School
Shinfield Road
Reading RG2 7DE
Friday 29th August 2025

To all Friends everywhere,

“Love and justice require us to examine our own practices and behaviours, and to work for systemic change.” - Minute 27 of Yearly Meeting 2022

Between Friday 22nd and Saturday 30th August 2025, 65 Friends joined at Leighton Park School, Reading to create an intentional community. We leave with hope for the future, stemming from the clear desire expressed during the week for positive change and the possibilities for building better worlds.

Senior Conference offers us an opportunity to connect with amazing people, who work together to create an environment that is welcoming, open and committed to acceptance and valuing everyone's ideas and experiences. We come together to cultivate a space in which we can all try and be our true selves. This year's theme was 'Embracing Our Differing Truths Within a Community' and we explored this through the week with speaker sessions, meetings for worship and discussion. We also had Secret Friends, games and activity workshops.

Within the larger community we gathered in what we call 'Base Groups' to explore the theme through discussing the speaker sessions, playing games, making our costumes for the themed dinner and creating our contribution to the final night's talent show. In these more intimate settings we created smaller communities that became mini-families for us; allowing us to connect with people we might not necessarily become friends with otherwise and providing support for people who might be at the event for the first time.

We also had the opportunity to connect with other base groups, allowing us to meet more people from across the event.

During the week we gathered in silent worship twice a day, in the morning for prologue and in the evening for epilogue. During the week we found that Friends expressed themselves through meaningful and insightful ministry and were willing and open to bring deep thoughts and feelings that helped us reflect, often in unexpected ways. We were struck by how many Friends ministered for the first time and this is something we found particularly special.

Our first speaker was Debby Flack, a member of the Britain Yearly Meeting Reparations Working Group and The Black, Brown and People of Colour Friends Fellowship. She spoke to us about Friends involvement in the Atlantic slave trade, including Quaker businesses that provided chains and shackles for slave traders. She also explained to us her concept of reparations, starting with an understanding of how and why Quakers were involved in the Atlantic slave trade and from there how we can make redress for our role in this historical injustice. We heard about the estimation of the financial impact of making reparations, how this would be in the trillions of pounds and she helped us conceive of how large of a number this really is. We were reminded that our Quaker values require us to tell the truth about historical and contemporary injustice, and how this commitment impells us to take accountability when we ourselves are or have been involved.

We heard from three of the Adult Volunteers (called 'The 22+ Team') who delivered a Lifelines session, in which they spoke about pivotal moments in their lives. They spoke about school experiences, family histories, neurodiversity, addiction, health and wellbeing. This session allowed us to hear about the struggles people can face on their journeys and the importance of perseverance. Through hearing these stories we took hope about how we can grow in the future through staying true to ourselves. Across all three speakers we heard of how much they had been supported by young Quaker events when they were our age and the place they held and continue to hold for them.

The session helped us become a fuller community through building bridges between the 22+ team and participants, allowing us to better understand the hope the event gives us, how we carry this out into our lives and how this helps shape our futures.

Our next speaker was Lyndsay Burtonshaw, the Peace and Faith in Action Coordinator for Quaker Peace and Social Witness, who led an interactive session. We examined our differing truths through a 'body mapping' exercise in which we drew around our bodies and used this as a space to write down our own truths and examine what is important to us. We compared what we had written and saw the overlaps in people discussing their identities and values, others focusing on their experiences, likes and dislikes. We looked at truths that came easily to us, such as liking music, but also examining deeper meanings within ourselves that also brought us discomfort. Some of us designed our 'dream village' examining what we thought about labour and work; government and justice; land and natural resources; relationships, bodies and sexuality. While others did a Zine making exercise allowing us to explore where we are 'from', or creating creatures that embody our emotions. This session allowed us creative space to explore our personal truths, and in sharing them allowed us to find points of connection as well as what makes us unique.

Our final speakers were ecumenical accompaniers, Caroline and Sue Crosfield. They are a part of the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI) and have worked as human rights monitors in Occupied East Jerusalem and the West Bank. They told us about the work they did: living in small, international teams monitoring human rights violations, preventing harassment of children walking to school and helping peace groups. They discussed how their presence in and of itself was powerful and a form of protection as they were there as witnesses. We had the opportunity to ask further questions to Caroline and Sue in the more intimate environment of base groups. Within the context of the ongoing genocide in Gaza, this session particularly sparked passionate and thoughtful discussions within this space and we held further creative listening groups afterwards. We found it challenging and

productive to explore how we express our understanding of our differing truths within our own community.

We were very grateful to receive a pre-recorded video session from Yuan Yang, a Quaker Labour MP for the new constituency of Earley and Woodley. Within this she brought up how it is harder to experience communities and human contact in the world today, due to the increase of easily accessible technology, for example self checkouts at supermarkets. Yuan spoke about the difficulty in finding communities from her work in parliament and how she tries to counteract this by starting her own. She invited us to think about what we can do to prevent this trend in our own lives. This made us appreciate this event as a space for real connection and community.

Every evening we had entertainments, which included; the Base Group Challenge offering a chance to bond with the group through completing funny collaborative tasks. We had a Disco which was themed as Heroes and Villains, giving us a chance to dress up and have fun; a Barn Dance led by a professional folk band; a lively Quiz night; movie night, hunt the committee and the final night's talent show. These vibrant sessions were an opportunity to share laughter and joy, building new connections and memories.

We are struck by the openness, love and joy of this community, how we meet only once a year and become close friends with each other, for the first time, or again. For those of us returning year on year, it has become something we have come to expect from Senior Conference; the inevitability of a safe and welcoming community, one in which everyone is friends with everyone else. While many of us are sad to be moving on, we are reassured that the spirit that we have nourished here will be carried out into the world in the coming days, weeks, months and years.

We express deep thanks to everyone who is involved in making this event so special – the Arrangements Committee (drawn from our participants), which is made up of our

Clerks, Elders, Ents, Universal Friends, Base Group Facilitator Coordinators, Base Group Facilitators, and our 22+ team. We also thank Leighton Park School for hosting the event. Finally, we thank all participants for taking on, supporting and engaging with the event and creating this beautiful community. We end this epistle with some words from A. A Milne – “how lucky I am to have something that makes saying goodbye so hard.”

Signed in and on behalf of Senior Conference 2025,

Kiri Acquah Storey and Laura Lee
Clerks 2025