

To all Friends everywhere,

From the 15th-19th August 2020, the first ever online Senior Conference was held. Twenty-seven 14 to 18 year-olds and ten adult volunteers came together from around the country (and beyond!) to enjoy five days of fun activities and exploration of our theme: "Understanding our place as a religious society". To address this theme, we heard from three speakers, examining both the theological diversity within Quakerism as well as the place Quakerism holds within society as a whole.

On Sunday, the first full day, we heard from Roger Warren Evans, a nontheist Friend and member of the Nontheist Friends Network. By sharing the story of his past, Roger explained his present standpoint as a nontheist Quaker, ultimately defining himself as an 'evolutionary nontheist'. Roger shared that he grew up surrounded by vastly opposed theological views. Though attending a Quaker school, this conflict made him hesitate to take any strong standpoints towards the beginning of his life, keeping his head down religiously and generally "fudging the issue". As a student, he was the secretary of the Cambridge Humanist Society led by E.M. Forster, whom Roger quoted as saying "tolerance is what's left when love gets left behind". This impacted Roger's view that he could not simply be an atheist. Later in his life, Roger returned to Quakerism as he felt that it was a "genuinely open-minded culture", a sentiment shared by many conferees. He concluded philosophically that he believes humans are a "malfunctioning species", and that it is our actions which are most important. This is what can change the future.

Monday's talk was from Mark Russ, a self-identified "Quaker-shaped Christian". Mark asked us to consider what our understanding of religious experience is, and shared his own experiences with us. He explained how he sees religion as a set of practices, beliefs and stories, which all come together to form an individual's experience of the world. One of the most famous Quaker quotations is from George Fox: "there is that of God in everyone" — and to some Quakers, in everything — however, many religious people experience periods of time when they are closer to God, or further away. Mark shared that through his years as a Quaker he has learned not to be hard on himself, or on God, for these periods of spiritual dryness. He also shared four turning points in his life where he felt as if he encountered God. The first, was Mark's experience of coming out as gay age 17 and the subsequent "spiritual coming out" — a deep connection to God and the world. He also shared other experiences with us including comparing drag queens to priests for the gay community: "Drench me in that big, gay, glittery Holy Spirit". Mark reminded us that religious experience is not always big and dramatic, but sometimes small or retrospective.

On Tuesday, for our final speaker session, Grace Da Costa talked to us about the other side of our theme — the place held by Quakerism in a sociopolitical context. As Public Affairs and Advocacy Manager for Britain Yearly Meeting, Grace talked to us about her role as a lobbyist, explaining how building strong relationships with influential individuals and groups can help bring about change in line with Quaker values. She also explained the reasons why faith groups, including Quakers, have such an important role in political environments, citing that faith in action can often be powerful and elicit a more positive response among others than action taken

in other contexts. Grace encouraged us to think critically and challenge the position of privilege that we all recognise British Quakers hold in society as a majority white, middle-class, Christocentric group. We were reminded to remain humble, listen to and learn from the opinions and voices of those marginalised in society as a whole and within the Quaker community — especially when their experiences are different from our own. We will continue to think analytically about our aims, action and audiences in every step we take towards a more equal future.

Building a strong community online over the course of five days was never going to be as simple as if the event were in person. A staple of Senior Conference is base groups — small groups facilitated by conferees — which provide a comfortable space for participants to make new friends and share experiences and worries. Despite not having the usual ‘hub’ of a base group room, ‘breakout rooms’ on Zoom provided the privacy and intimacy needed for the conferees to bond, discuss themed sessions, create comedy sketches and play a variety of online games. In addition to base groups, prologue and epilogue each day provided a sounding board of spiritual togetherness among participants and a place to get into and out of the Conference headspace. On Tuesday night, many 18-year-olds experienced their final Senior Conference epilogue, and this made for a typically atmospheric and emotional last evening in spite of the physical distance between us.

As always, the event was full of fun activities. The evening entertainment sessions allowed us to come together over Zoom even though we could not achieve the sessions’ normal physicality. Ents included a quiz (with questions well-designed to avoid any cheating!) and a ‘themed showcase’ during which each base group turned up in costume, accompanied by a pre-prepared video which was shown to the whole group. For the final night, we stuck to Conference tradition and had an online adaptation of the classic talent show. Conferees sent in a variety of videos showcasing their diverse skills. We ended the night having seen a Quaker rap, slam poetry and even some live fortune telling. Each night, one person volunteered to read a bedtime story after epilogue. These proved extremely popular and we heard tales from great children’s authors such as Beatrix Potter and Dr. Seuss. Though online, these activities helped create the wonderful sense of togetherness for which Senior Conference is so loved.

Conferees left this year’s event with a heightened understanding of the position of Quakers in both a theological and societal sense. As well as seeing first hand the diversity of beliefs within Quakerism, we learnt of the importance to recognise and understand the religious (or non-religious) standpoints of others. We know the significance of putting our faith into action and how, when combined with the willpower to change things, we can use this to make a positive difference in the world. Perhaps the most noticeable thing to be taken away from Senior Conference 2020 is the sense that, even in these difficult and divisive times, young Quakers can always come together as one.

Signed in and on behalf of Senior Conference 2020,

Jonathan H and Issy C-W, Clerks.