

To all Friends everywhere,

From the 14th to the 21st of August 2021, 52 young Friends aged 15 to 18 and 11 adult volunteers gathered at Sibford School in Oxfordshire to explore the theme of 'Global Quaker Living'. This year's Senior Conference marked a return to form, as it was an in-person event, with only a few lingering pandemic constraints. Our time in quarantine had highlighted the importance of our wider Quaker networks; we decided therefore to explore the role of Quakers in different communities around the world as well as their different experiences of faith and living.

The first speaker was Colin South, who was the Director of Ramallah Friends School, in Palestine, from 2000 to 2004. He spoke about his experiences living and working in the school, talking about both the positive and negative elements of life in the West Bank in the early 2000s during the Second Intifada (Uprising). This was a period of intense violence in the region; however, the members of the school community came together to make the best of their situation. An example of their solidarity was when the students produced a play about national identity and perhaps most crucially, conflict resolution. This was in response to when a young member of the local community was harmed at the IDF (Israeli Defence Force) checkpoint on the way to school. Colin then also offered some reflections on the potential dangers of national identity.

The next speaker, Sergei Nikitin, was the head of Amnesty International Russia for 14 years. He talked about his experience being raised in the Soviet Union under an ideology of religious oppression, which limited spiritual options. He informed us of his work documenting Quaker relief work during the Great Famine between 1921 and 1931. This information had been repressed and was only known by a small number of people in the region; therefore, he published a book in Russian to help restore that knowledge to his compatriots. He then answered questions about his time with Amnesty International, primarily talking about his attempts to instigate human rights policy changes under the previous government, such as mitigating the brutality of the police force. He concluded by expressing concern for fellow Quakers at Friends House Moscow and all young people in Russia under the Putin administration. A specific quote that stayed in our minds when reflecting on how his life differed in England is when he said: "I no longer fear the knock on the door."

The fact that Sergei joined us on Zoom represented the changed nature of the event post-Covid; it worked well and we feel this is a positive possibility for future events. Additionally, the speakers highlighted to us changes we wanted to see in the world to contribute to a safer future, not only for our fellow Quakers but for humanity as a whole. Colin's speech included a particularly powerful and moving message on how the only thing we can do is try, even under extreme circumstances.

These sessions helped us to get a deeper grasp on the theme and the realities of those living among oppression – particularly the way in which the speakers maintained their faith in peace despite conflict around them. This was reflected in the 'Make a Country' workshop; a lively session in which we created fictitious countries and roleplayed conflict and negotiation between them.

We also used 'Chat Room' sessions, facilitated by the Arrangements Committee, to discuss global issues and the role Quakers play in UK politics, especially their involvement with peaceful protests. We looked at Quaker work abroad and how Friends work with those

from all backgrounds and communities to contribute towards positive global change. These chat rooms incited lively, interesting debate whilst facilitating a safe space for participants to get to know each other, as due to the unusual circumstances of the past 18 months many of us were meeting for the first time.

Base Group sessions played a key role in fostering these relationships, with each consisting of 6-8 participants and acting as de-facto families, where newcomers could start to form bonds with other young Quakers. The Base Group Challenge acted as a catalyst for these bonds, as we had to face and tackle challenges together. We met several times a day allowing for some time to relax and talk in more intimate groups, as well as enabling us to look out for each other. Each participant was assigned a secret friend for the week: people would get fun surprises such as chocolate, kind notes and the occasional treasure hunt. This helped to establish a very caring atmosphere amongst all the delightful chaos.

The relationship between participants and the adult volunteers was also developed in a session called 'Lifelines', where three members of the 22+ team laid out their life stories using graphs to demonstrate the ups and downs of their lives, as well as offer insight into some of the challenges they have faced. Many of us found this to be a highly emotional and moving session, and we were very grateful that they shared their experiences and vulnerabilities.

Due to lingering Covid risks, the usual Oxford trip was cancelled. Not wanting to miss out on this key event, the spirit of Oxford was captured in 'Moxford' where the highlights of the trip were recreated in a satirical manner, akin to that of a summer fete. Booths ranged from 'Crymark' to 'Mys *TIKue's* Fortune Telling', as well as a bouncy castle. Moxford was quite an affair, allowing us to procure costumes for the illustrious themed dinner. People dined dressed up as all sorts, from condiments to disciples, from monopoly characters to goths; but as in previous years we all looked sensational!

However, *these* costumes were merely a preview for the following night's 'Shrek' themed disco. People dressed in a highly creative and imaginative array of glamorous and sophisticated outfits and danced energetically and expressively.

Conferees this year left the event with a renewed and expanded sense of Quaker community, with old friendships rekindled and new ones forged. We reflected on historical and contemporary Quaker action and activism around the world, as well as how our lives of faith compel us to act. In the context of the last 18 months, we felt one of the most critical takeaways of the event was that we as Quakers should work towards fostering global communities of peace and togetherness, even in the most trying of times. We move out into the world with a greater sense of connection to that which is eternal in all of us.

Signed in and on behalf of all Senior Conference

Sammy G and Natalie A S; Clerks of 2021