

Dear Friends,

I've just come back from three days spent in Derbyshire, at the Triennial Churches Together England Forum - the broadest ecumenical gathering in England. I was there as the London Quakers representative on the Churches Together South London (CTSL) Senior Churches Leader Group.

The theme this time was *I am with you always*. For Quakers that theme might be interpreted in as many different ways as there are Quakers. My Quaker desire to experience, interpret and uncover personal 'Friendly' truth was challenged by the language and prayers of the Opening Worship session. It reminded me of other recent faith experiences. In August I attended an Anglican service delivered half in Welsh; a couple of weeks later, I was at a RC Eucharist delivered in French. While the theology and the expression of particular concepts, in each of these three settings, were foreign, the spirit was very clear. 2 Corinthians 3: v 5-6¹ rang in my ears as I participated in that initial worship session. The usual interpretation of verse 6 is that the old law or word condemned sinners to die, whereas the spirit embodied by Jesus promised life. But as the words of the verse circled my head they had a different meaning. What they said to me was, 'Look beyond the words to find what the spirit intended'. In other words,

*'... respect that of God in everyone though it may be expressed in unfamiliar ways or be difficult to discern? Each of us has a particular experience of God and each must find the way to be true to it. When words are strange or disturbing to you, try to sense where they come from... Listen patiently and seek the truth...'*²

It's unsurprising that a convention that brought together representatives of 47 denominations and 51 ecumenical charities and organisations should encompass a wide range of beliefs and perspectives. It was inspirational and challenging. I heard some views that I found difficult to reconcile with my understanding of God; I heard other people's truths and they made sense to me only as metaphor; and I received yet other ministry that spoke directly to me. In receiving all of this, I was supported by another piece of Quaker text -

*'The Quaker understanding of Christianity includes: the experience that it is possible to have both a strong faith commitment and an open mind, to take other positions seriously without trivialising them, and to value the people who differ from ourselves.'*³

That need to be open to others' experience of God, was paramount throughout the event and it was uplifting to see people trying hard to understand each other's theological positions, to cross divides and to accept that all were acting in good faith. So far so positive, but what emerged in smaller group discussions was a regret that we couldn't engage with

¹ .⁵ Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything as being from ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God, ⁶ who also made us sufficient as ministers of the new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

² Advices and Queries, 7.

³ Janet Scott, Quaker Faith and Practice 23.73. (Janet was a speaker at the Bible Study session mentioned overleaf.)

real theological tensions, perhaps they fell into the pending or too difficult category. Necessarily the focus was on what we have in common rather than what sets us apart. The management of those ongoing tensions was out of scope.

While writing up these notes, I have asked myself some questions put to me by the CTSL ecumenical officer - what stood out, surprised me or did I learn that I wouldn't have learned anywhere else? Perhaps my selection of 'front of memory files' below captures some of the answers.

It's wonderful how connected it's possible to feel in a small group sharing night-time ecumenical worship together - music, silence, prayer, words; or at a pre-breakfast Quaker Meeting for Worship peopled by a majority of non-Quakers; or Taizé singing quietly in the evening.

It's astonishing how inspiring a dry-sounding plenary Bible study session, featuring three experts exploring 22 biblical verses, can be. To my own astonishment, I found this the most motivational session of the Forum. The relevance of the story for me as a Quaker became crystal clear in the line offered by Janet Scott, 'God requires our co-operation'.

It's amazing how often you come across one of only nine Quakers (out of the two hundred other people at the event), when

- a. asked to go and speak to someone you don't know in a plenary session;
- b. queuing for coffee and turning to talk to the person behind you;
- c. randomly selecting a table to sit at for lunch;
- d. waiting for a taxi.

If you have an appetite for more, you can find it, including video of our very own young Friend, Hannah Brock, grilling Justin Welby, Vincent Nichols and Anba Anangelos, at https://www.cte.org.uk/Groups/311723/Home/Resources/2018_Forum_Together/Forum_texts_videos/Forum_texts_videos.aspx.

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