

BYM Sustainability Gathering, 18-20 March 2016, Friday evening session

Where are we on the journey of our commitment?

Lis Burch

Much of the rest of the weekend will provide opportunities for us to consider where we each are individually, and where our meetings and communities are, and where we are going. I would like to start by thinking about where we are as a yearly meeting, and what might be the role of this gathering in it.

In 2011 we made our most recent commitment as a yearly meeting to respond to our concern for the Earth and the well-being of all who dwell in it, by pledging to become a low-carbon, sustainable community. I say our most recent commitment, because we have made commitments before: for instance over 20 years earlier we had united with the World Council of Churches' work on Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation.

So we hadn't suddenly received new information in 2011, but we did experience a corporate – kick up the backside? I have had the sensation in some meetings for business of being spiritually seized by the scruff of the neck, that sensation in which it becomes absolutely clear to a meeting what it must do, and I think that is what we experienced in Canterbury in 2011.

I found some notes I had made in preparation for the yearly meeting session in which we made that corporate commitment. I had jotted down: 'No obvious major action for YM – thinking is still diverse and there are some gaps, many individual issues, no obvious corporate commitment yet.'

How wrong can you be?

So we did take a huge step forward on our journey during that yearly meeting.

At this point I want to think a little about that corporate commitment and what it entails. The previous equivalent experience in YM had been in York in 2009, when the yearly meeting found itself strongly led to support same-sex marriage. The experiences were similar in the sense of having a deeply gathered meeting moving quite significantly to a new position, experiencing that depth of worship and openness and listening to the spirit which embodies our spirit-led decision-making at its most faithful best.

But what happens then after the yearly meeting? In the case of equal marriage, members of staff and small groups of Friends were charged with doing the necessary work, revising Quaker Faith & Practice, updating advice to registering officers, and working with politicians, civil servants and others to explain and urge our position. Bobs your uncle! Our view was accepted and the law largely changed. Everyone can get married, end of story. A relatively small number of people were involved in the follow up to yearly meetings's decision, and a relatively small number of people's lives were able to change. Obviously, many lives changed in the sense that we are all living in a slightly more equal society, but most people's personal circumstances were not altered by this.

Obviously it's very different with the commitment to become a low-carbon, sustainable community.

Unlike the equal marriage issue, this commitment requires a large number of people to be involved in following up the yearly meeting's decision, and all of our lives must and will change.

There is no single, simple way of following up our commitment. We are not campaigning for something which only affects a small number of people. There are many, many different ways of contributing towards our goal. The comment I found in my notes 'thinking is still diverse' is as true now as it was then.

As a yearly meeting we were led to make a commitment to something which not only affects the way we conduct ourselves as a yearly meeting, but also impacts on each of us individually, in our own households and meetings and local communities. It raises the question of the nature of spiritual discernment and authority, in that a decision arising from worship in the yearly meeting then depends on individual Friends and meetings accepting that corporate discipline and acting on the decision. Having been faithful to its leading and made its commitment, the yearly meeting does not necessarily revisit the topic in future years, or at least not in depth. Its agenda is discerned each year by the committee of Friends appointed to do that task, and they respond to the issues which are rising throughout the yearly meeting at that time, as brought forward through various groups and committees, through meeting for sufferings, and through area meetings.

So once yearly meeting has made a commitment such as that to become a low-carbon, sustainable community, what happens to it? It is handed over to Friends and Meetings, and will return to yearly meeting itself in the form of periodic reports, or as yearly meeting sessions if it's discerned by Agenda Committee as a subject which is timely for the YM agenda. It is up to us, ordinary Friends and meetings, to a large extent, how the commitment will be taken forward. Much of the information and campaigning work is coordinated very ably by staff and committee members of the centrally managed work, like Quaker Peace and Social Witness, and Quaker Life (that is done with us and on our behalf) and that forms a core thread through this gathering. But the rest of us are responsible for working to embed the commitment throughout the whole yearly meeting. No-one will step in and do it for us.

The Sustainability Group which has organised this weekend is appointed by Meeting for Sufferings as one of the ways in which it tries to fulfil the responsibilities laid on it as a result of the yearly meeting commitment. It's often said that Meeting for Sufferings acts as yearly meeting between sessions, and I think that's also what weekends like this are doing too. We are carrying the concern, the commitment, we are spending time together in worship to discern what we are called to do next, where we are led. And we must share that in whatever ways we can with the wider Society of Friends and the wider society. And anything can happen – that's the glory of trusting in Quaker processes. Although we don't work quickly, as long as we are spirit-led, absolutely anything can happen.

There have been a lot of markers along the journey of our commitment – Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation was one, Yearly Meeting Gathering at Canterbury was another. This weekend might be one too. Let's be open to that, as we go through the rest of our time together.