

Meeting for Sufferings: on the internet?

Alan Ray-Jones *poses the question*

Meeting for Sufferings (MfS) has too much business to fulfil its main task at every Meeting: to develop a prophetic vision for the Religious Society of Friends. Or is its main purpose to act as the link between Local Meetings and the central work? Of course both functions are vital, and the discussions now under way in MfS recognise the dilemma (*'A rolling vision', 15 October 2010*). The Review Group looking at the roles of MfS and Britain Yearly Meeting (BYM) trustees has suggested that MfS should be smaller, and this certainly has support. But if MfS had, say, only one representative from each Area Meeting, would it really be small enough, and have the right people on it, for the first of these roles? And how would the second be carried out?

Some Friends feel that the Quaker Business Method works best in smaller meetings, particularly those where people already know each other. It works well in Local and Area Meetings, perhaps not so well in MfS, which can seem very daunting to a newcomer. Although the Spirit may urge any of us to rise to our feet, some of us undeniably have greater oratorical skills than others and think better on our feet. In larger meetings time limitations inevitably mean that discernment is inhibited by the clock. It is at least arguable that the best size for a 'prophetic vision MfS' might be about forty Friends.

One obvious aid is the internet. Would George Fox have used it if it had been available? I'm sure that he would have done, since many of his supporters were young: how could he not have done? But can we? Age doesn't have to be an insuperable barrier – at eighty, I should know. The internet can't be ignored, because by using it we can communicate and discern at a distance, either in writing through email and forums, or by speech and vision through video conferencing. Low cost video conferencing is coming, under development by Skype and Google, a development that Quakers will no doubt welcome, because it will bring people throughout the world still closer together.

For MfS, a forum as a 'virtual' meeting place for Meeting for Worship for Business has several major advantages:

- Meetings can take place over a period, not squeezed into one day. There can be time for reflection;
- The proceedings can be viewed by others, they can be as transparent as may be wished for;
- There are no travelling or accommodation costs, and no extra CO₂ released due to each meeting;
- Friends who might not speak in a large meeting can contribute, as well as more vocal Friends;
- Used well, it could make the central work seem much less remote from Local Meetings; and
- It could bring young Friends more directly into the main business of the Society.

To achieve this technically, we are blessed with a BYM Communications Department with the necessary skills: they have already set up a well-used BYM forum for enquirers. Of course there are hurdles:

- Not all Friends have computers with an internet connection. True, but not all Friends can come to London for a Meeting every two months. I would guess that most existing MfS representatives have the necessary equipment already.
- Friends involved with MfS need to meet physically from time to time, not only online. Yes, but this can happen in other ways. For example, Friends on MfS who live in adjacent counties could meet socially from time to time, to discuss issues without the pressure of immediate business.

I don't know whether Friends will react to this idea with alarm or enthusiasm, irritation or silence. At one level, perhaps it doesn't matter, as long as the aids available to us are not simply overlooked. 'A rolling vision' ends with the words: 'It (is) a time of challenge and a time of change'. I would only add those well-known words of the Kindlers: 'We need kindlers, not snuffers'. My own view is that the Quaker vision is too important for us to continue in the old ways, and that we should make best use of the means available to us.