

Testimony to the grace of God as shown in the life of Norman Stevens 1914 - 2007

Norman Stevens first came to Quaker meetings at the age of eighteen, and was accepted into membership of the Religious Society of Friends in 1935, following a visit by Thomas Bailey and William Bennington. We are indebted to Norman for reaching back into his memory in many conversations with Gerry Winnall, helping her to prepare 'A Record of the History of Exmouth Quaker Meeting'. Norman recalled that Exmouth Meeting started as occasional meetings in friends' houses, and then became an 'allowed meeting', for which Friends gathered monthly in the YMCA in Victoria Road in 1932. The fact that he could remember so much detail, describing the eight founder members and the work of the Meeting, and also that he shared the care given by Exmouth Quakers to refugees during wartime, is a mark of his concern and care for people around him.

Norman and his wife Margaret, who died in 2006, were a true partnership in their sixty years of marriage, sharing their beliefs. Norman was popular and a good conversationalist – although he said little of his private relationship with God, his beliefs were evidenced in his life through his constant service to the community and his hospitality. He was a conscientious objector to military service during the Second World War. Having joined the Labour Party with his Quaker friend Roland Atkinson, he later stood for Parliament, and the two friends canvassed together, despite the prevailing adverse public opinion about conscientious objectors. Norman remained a loyal party member for 76 years, and was a popular, entertaining speaker. He joined Exeter Friends in offering Christmas hospitality to German prisoners of war and later supported the German Democratic Republic. Norman's commitment to others also showed in his regular weekly conversations with Roland Atkinson, a friendship which lasted until the end of his life. Roland later described Norman's acts of kindness, writing 'No-one could have had a more loyal friend'.

During the war, Norman worked for the Adult School Union and also as Agent for the Co-Operative Insurance Society. Later he worked for the Co-Operative Union, and when he retired, he then became a member of the urban District Council, subsequently being appointed Chairman.

We knew Norman to be a good Christian, with the courage of his convictions. Norman had a fund of biblical and hymnal knowledge, drawn from his Methodist upbringing, which he frequently used in his ministry. We remember his favourite passage, often quoted: 'What does the Lord require of thee? A question posed by the prophet Micah. The response was 'To do justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with thy God'. Norman was a man who knew his own mind. He was reluctant to take orders, and sometimes to accept expert advice, but he lived by his favourite biblical quote, being peace loving, open and fair minded. Ray Davidson, who knew him well, wrote in the Exmouth Journal "Norman was a person who was fair and true, a simply wonderful socialist and an inspiration to us all who love peace and progress. His legacy is a challenge to us to match his purpose and sincerity".

Towards the end of his life, Norman became more frail and with diminished mobility and sight, but he continued to serve Exmouth Meeting by welcoming Friends and Visitors as they arrived, with his characteristic warmth and good humour. He found great satisfaction in seeing the Meeting grow from a very small membership with an uncertain future to the well established Meeting that we now have in Exmouth.

In his will, Norman Stevens bequeathed the major part of his estate to be used for Quaker purposes. It may possibly be used to purchase a Meeting House. As ever, Norman was looking ahead.

This testimony was prepared for Exmouth Meeting
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