

The Silent Society? Advocacy and publicity amongst Quakers

By Alan Ray-Jones, Tavistock Quaker Meeting

Take any issue of current public concern affecting the 'vulnerable other' – indefinite imprisonment without trial, mistreatment of asylum seekers by unscrupulous employers, or the lack of a safe haven for children running away from home.

Quakers say that we are all children of God, and – as individuals – we care about such things. You might reasonably think that Quakers in Britain – BYM – would use our collective voice to help get something done about them – as do other churches, and organisations like Oxfam and Amnesty International.

But you would be wrong. We are the Silent Society of Friends. You are unlikely to hear on the Today programme, see on Channel 4, or read in The Guardian, that Quakers in Britain (as distinct from individual Friends) have said this or that, or urged the government, or taken a stand, or made proposals – unless it happens to be about one of the necessarily small number of issues that Michael Bartlet, our Parliamentary Liaison Officer, is working on with MPs, or something that QPSW is doing.

An individual Friend's concern goes first to the Local Meeting, then to the Monthly Meeting, and then Meeting for Sufferings, – which may call for a report from QPSW or another committee before it considers the matter.

It's by no means certain that the next Monthly Meeting will have room on its agenda for a personal concern, and some meet only bi-monthly, so it may take four months to get even one step up the ladder. It may take a year or more to reach the top rung, by which time the world has moved on, and the media has lost interest in the issue.

Unsurprisingly this route is little used for such 'external' concerns, and Friends House doesn't have the means to monitor current events and react appropriately.

In May 2007, Meeting for Sufferings reported that it issued no public statements in 2006:

'6.1 We did not issue any public statements on behalf of Britain Yearly Meeting during 2006; but in response to minutes from two monthly Meetings and subsequent advice from QPSW in November, we asked for a draft statement on torture and civil liberty to be prepared for our approval.'

George Fox – or a bishop, if we had one – would speak for Quakers in Britain, and take the risk that some Friend somewhere might disagree with some detail.

So why don't we ask the recording clerk or the clerk of Meeting for Sufferings to speak for us when the conflict with our testimonies is clear? If a support group of media-wise and politically savvy Friends were to be established, could we trust them to do such work? I hope so. We don't do our testimonies and values justice if BYM stands at the side and says nothing.

Inaction is dangerous too, because it may not always be the vulnerable other – it might eventually be the vulnerable us. As far as trust goes there is a very recent precedent: after much prayerful thought, BYM trusted the new group of trustees to look after its finances.

There may be Friends who make a clear distinction between the spiritual and political and want BYM to avoid the latter. Which was slavery? Thomas Mann said that everything is politics: the Quakers of the 17th century experienced that at the time of the persecution, when Margaret Fell spoke to the King on their behalf. It's surely time for BYM to develop a collective voice again, and speak truth to power, in public, on issues which conflict with our testimonies and values.

The Friend, 8 June 2007

Alan Ray-Jones

P.S. Readers should read the 'Issues, Concerns, Actions' page for an update on this issue.