

Whoosh! Conference

Woodbrooke, Birmingham, 27-29 July 2012

Paul Parker, the Quaker Recording Clerk (Chief Executive at Friends House London in all but name), said as soon as he took over the job in May 2011 that he thought Quakers would 'go Whoosh' while he was at post. Perhaps it was a way of saying that he would do all he could to bring it about, but of course it depends on us, though he and the committees and staff at Friends House and elsewhere can certainly help a lot.

What is meant by 'going Whoosh!'? It is certainly to do with the number of Quakers in Britain, and also I think our energy level. Quakers made up 1% of the population of Britain in 1700. Nowadays that would translate into 600,000 Friends – a good few more than there are at present. Which of us would deny that this country would benefit from having 600,000 Quakers in it? One of our groups at the weekend called itself 'why go Woosh?'

So this was a conference about the future of the Religious Society of Friends in Britain, using a space left for it in Woodbrooke's programme even before Paul became Recording Clerk. I had to be there, or risk missing the start of something exciting. Out of 57 Friends present, I was the only one from west of Bristol, which perhaps makes it doubly important for me to report on the conference as best I can. If anyone wants to know more about it than I include here, please do contact me at alan@ray-jones.org.uk or ring 01822 810606. Many who were there have had or have now key responsibilities amongst Quakers, so that was a good sign, suggesting that the outcome would be fed into the relevant central committees and taken seriously by them.

The weekend was run by Paul himself and by Helen Rowlands, Director of Education at Woodbrooke. It was sponsored by the Quaker Life department at Friends House as well as Woodbrooke, but they left the running of it entirely to Paul and Helen. The rocket analogy was in the programme for the whole weekend, from Session 1: 'Assembling the crew' on Friday evening, through to Session 8: 'Re-entry' on Sunday morning.

At one point we launched seven physical rockets, using bike and car pumps, from the terrace outside the new and beautiful lounge at Woodbrooke. Mine flew over us on to the roof behind - although it was pointed the other way - and sprinkled us with water. If you want to buy one or more, they are available on the internet at <http://www.rokit.com/> at about £12 each including the bottle, or about £48 for five. Recommended for parties and science lessons!

We probably won't know for ages which of the ideas we produced take root. Area and Local Meetings are already deluged with ideas from Friends House, and take-up is likely to be slow in any case. Don't hold your breath, but there is certainly lots that individual Friends can already do to help us go whoosh, from outreach to getting rid of unnecessary, out of date procedures and language, so there's no need to wait! A Friend undertook to find out who in her Area Meeting had media training, and if no one came forward, to have it herself.

Very soon after starting on Friday evening we split into randomly selected small groups, about eight in each. Mine included the ex director of Woodbrooke, returning there for the first time since she left, and the last clerk of Meeting for Sufferings. Some of the ideas produced by us and the other small groups were written on post-it notes by concerned individuals – not by the group as a whole. They were stuck during our discussions either on a wall on one side of the room as changes we think are needed to go whoosh; or on the

opposite wall as negative topics (obstacles to necessary change eg 'lack of confidence amongst Friends'); and parked for consideration later in the weekend. In the last session those 'boulders' were divided by Paul into four groups, from large boulder steep hill to small pebble gentle slope, depending on how difficult we thought each might be to push along.

In the plenary sessions we had opportunities to speak to our own ideas if we wished, and then to discuss them: first in our small groups, and then on Saturday evening (during the Olympics opening ceremony!) with those interested in the same broad idea. The bee buzzing in my bonnet ever since my visit to Cuba in 2010 has been to make a nationwide attempt to discern how Meetings in the UK may become more hospitable to complete families, and retain people of all ages throughout their lives, as they used to do.

Arguably this might be helped if Meetings could develop programmed or semi-programmed Meetings for worship as well as their existing predominantly silent Meetings for worship, acknowledging that in the rest of the world programmed Meetings tend to expand their numbers, whereas silent ones don't; and that in our lives most of us are noisier or enjoy sound and action more when we are young than when we are older. Colchester Meeting, I learnt, has had a programmed Meeting for the last ten years, and there is one at Friends House, started by Kenyans who now join in silent Meetings as well. Perhaps significantly, Young Friends General Meeting (YFGM) which has a residential Meeting several times a year, has Preparation for Meeting, which may include singing of spiritually-relevant songs, guided meditation, yoga, a short bible study, or a group activity. I was told there was more music in Meetings three generations ago than there is now. Many Meetings are already experimenting with some programming. The evidence I have so far is that Friends in programmed Meetings abroad hold to Quaker testimonies just as much as do Friends in silent Meetings here.

There were many many other ideas. One for example, which can be briefly put, was that Friends House could become Quaker House, to clear up some of the confusion over our name and identity. Geoffrey Durham said that before 1700 Quakers spoke to the world with professionalism, a strategy, and strong leaders; but that since then we have spoken mainly to ourselves, and have become unnecessarily fearful of having leaders. So here we were, speaking to each other again, but might it be that we are already on the turn? Jennifer Barraclough reminded us that we have already made great changes over the last few years, and taken them in our stride.

In the final Meeting for Worship a Friend asked us to stand and sing a hymn, and we did.

What can we do in Devon - and Cornwall - to help go Whoosh!?

Alan Ray-Jones, 2 August 2012

PS: Jargon new to me, heard for the first time at the weekend: a 'proto-Quaker' is anyone who already appears to be a Quaker by the way they behave, but who doesn't know it. There are a lot of them out there.....