

Summer Gathering and the Future: Hope, Discernment and Action?

Summer gathering saw 50 of us gather for a session entitled “Quakers and the Future”. After a couple of short videos on climate change and how Quakers approach sustainability, we formed groups of around 6, and had periods to answer three questions:

- What are the key issues affecting our future?
- What are the spiritual implications?
- What can Quakers, collectively, be doing?

We were impressed by the energy and enthusiasm that were displayed and the profusion of responses that resulted. While there was a limited time to share the ideas at the time, we have been able to collect and assess them, and would like to promote continuing sharing and action.

The most dramatic outcome was the range of issues listed, with over 50 different responses. Beyond the traditional climate change were issues of inequity, politics, economics, consumerism, relationships and violence. We were quite astounded by this breadth – they almost suggested the scope of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The third question on collective action was almost as profuse, with over 30 responses over a wide range, including things we could do, who we could work with, how to decide what to do, how we could support each other, use the media and be politically active. One puzzling comment was “consider the role of the Futures Committee”!!

The response to the second question on the spiritual implications was a little more modest, with under 20 responses overall. Several groups referred to the SPICES testaments as a guide, which raised the issue of their relationship with spirituality. Other responses related to ‘that of God in everyone’ and ‘the still inner voice’.

Well, what could we make of all this? How could Futures Committee cope with that diversity. Then we realised that it was not up to Futures Committee, it was up to the wider Quaker fellowship, working with relevant external groups. In fact the action responses effectively established a scenario where Quaker communities would work out their own priorities using Quaker processes, establish connections with other groups, including faith groups, work through the media and apply political pressure. Could the Futures Committee add value in support of this action?

However the diversity may well be still an issue? If groups are to have the advantage of their collective efforts, there needs to be some commonality in what they do. Maybe in working out their programme they can work towards that commonality. At the same time, groups may form on the basis of an existing commonality – possibly working at a distance.

Another thought came to us as we considered the notes. They seemed to be mainly rational ideas – the “head stuff”. Where was the “heart stuff” – the fears, the confusion, the excitement? The factors that would make one become committed, or avoid getting involved?

Was this stuff relevant, was it there, was it suppressed? Perhaps our workshop format made it difficult to express? Should we look for ways that help people express their feelings better?

Is the way forward through acknowledging the dire consequences of climate change and going past the denial through the pain to hope and action? Must effective response to this environmental and human tragedy come from deep within us - from our heart? We may also gain from listening to each other, to diversity of experience and perception and to the divine light within us. Could Quakers develop a deeper appreciation of our collective experience, one that goes beyond technology and practices, one that speaks to how we see ourselves in this world, our relationship to other generations, the future, and the wider world as a whole? Could Quakers develop a message that speaks to other people and helps us all to face a rapidly changing and uncertain world?

One of the exciting aspects of this workshop was the link with the non-violent resistance workshops run by Sandy Hildebrandt – a style of protest action that is able to engage large sections of the community and has been demonstrated to be extra-ordinarily effective, even against quite violent regimes. This is completely in keeping with Quaker commitment to peace.

One of the disappointments was the absence of young Quakers in these events. Of course Summer Gathering is an intensely social opportunity for young people. But is not the future of crucial importance to them? Perhaps there are other factors which make engaging with such issues difficult. Are there other ways, such as through the Internet, that they can be better engaged? Maybe there are also others who find such workshops difficult. Are there ways in which workshops Committee can be more inclusive?

Many, many questions came out of this.

We felt that these outcomes were so powerful that we thought we should share them to enable continuing discussion and action. How could we do this? Email or mail the outcomes to those requesting it? Circulate to all MMs? Encourage discussion through email or mail? How about the Internet? We could put the outcomes on the Quaker site. This site cannot handle discussion at this stage, but would a Facebook group work? A closed group enables sharing to a defined group, to ensure a level of privacy. Even a phone call might be useful.

Perhaps we can start simple. We could put the results on the Quaker web site quaker.org.nz/futures, and you can email or phone call with comments. Depending on the response, we will set up a Facebook Group.

Wouldn't it be great if Quakers all around the country were sharing their ideas on how we could, individually and collectively, work towards a better future?

Keep in touch with developments by checking quaker.org.nz/futures, email <futurescommittee@quaker.org.nz> , phone 0211 020 977 or mail Gray Southon, 5 Arden St, Tauranga, 3112.

The Quaker Futures Committee.