

Senior Conference Epistle 2011

To all friends everywhere,

From the 20th to 27th August 2011, 87 young friends and a team of 13 volunteers aged 22+ gathered at Sibford School, Banbury. Together we explored the theme "Let your life speak" with invited speakers, in small "base" groups, through workshops, fun and games and in our worship.

We began to see how lives speak in different ways: big and small. One life that spoke out against the ways of a nation was that of Martin Luther King Jr., whom our first speaker, Quaker war poet David Roberts, referred to in his talk. David told us how MLK endeavoured to "leave a committed life behind," a wish that resonates clearly with our theme. Conferees were moved by Suheir Hammad's powerful poem "What I Will". It is a vibrant, personal expression of pacifism which shot quickly to international acclaim, illustrating the ability of the individual to have their voice heard.

This message was echoed by our second speaker, Yael Litmanovitz (a volunteer speaker for Amnesty International) in the quote "It is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness." This proverb reflects how even small acts have great importance so that by merely signing a letter we can help to change our world. The story of Iqbal Masih, an escaped sweatshop labourer of 10 who fought child labour in Pakistan, was one of the stories that prompted us to consider in worship how age and personal circumstance need not be obstacles to putting our faith into action.

Former conferee Sam Walton, a young Quaker activist, invited us to consider what seeds of war exist in our lives and how to remove them. He said that all Friends give witness throughout their lives but different individuals are called to do things in different ways. We must find our own responses to the issues we face. Most of all he challenged us to resist complacency, suggesting that events like Conference do not reach their full potential unless we take what we learn out into the world.

Friend David Shutt explored the way our lives are often shaped by others in his account of a life in politics. As a member of the House of Lords, David is part of historical traditions such as wearing a sword and accepting a title that seem controversial to some Friends. Despite this, his commitment to reform and "social responsibility" seemed to be the greater truth served by his life.

Three of our 22+ team shared how they have acted on the theme. While Tom Duggan, Hannah Rignell and Sally Markwell described diverse experiences, ranging from provocative art to setting up a special interest group, they were united by the conviction that letting your life speak is a matter of attending to what love requires of you. We must try to tackle the challenges of the world without being overwhelmed by them. Their stories showed us how it may be that your life does not speak for you but to you and that sometimes you must stop to listen.

Our lives spoke loudly at the event not only through our growing understanding of the theme but through friendships made and laughter shared. Every day base groups of up to 9 conferees met to discuss, reflect, play games and complete jigsaws together. These groups helped form close friendships in small, trusting communities, each part of the whole conference community. Everyone was also given a Secret Friend who anonymously gave them small treasures like bracelets and witty ditties. There was even a singing, dancing postal service to help with the delivery of such gifts.

The entertainments for the week included activities such as a treasure hunt, Junk Jazz, an open mic night, a talent show, a quiz and a masked ball. Our Themed Meal was also great fun, where base groups arrived dressed as things like washing machines, gametes and a game of Tetris. The 22+ team ran workshops like Origami, Music and Sport, providing another valuable way to socialise and enjoy

ourselves. In our visit to Oxford, a peaceful, melodic flash-mob was organised by a large group of conferees. All of these more light-hearted activities helped to release energy and counterbalance the more reflective parts of the week.

Throughout the event, worship helped us grow as individuals and as a community. One reading which touched conferees deeply told the story of Sadako, a terminally ill girl making paper cranes in the hope of recovery in the aftermath of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Songs were played in semi-programmed Epilogues and together we made a “Ministree” – from the branches of which hung ministry written on small paper tags. Conference was shaped by deeply felt ministry which both challenged and supported us.

The event relied upon the love between participants which made Conference a home from home – a safe place in which we could develop. Our challenge now is to let our lives speak more clearly, answering a demanding love of each other and our planet. We will not be bystanders in our own history. We will change the world, any little way we can, whether the change takes place on the global stage or around our kitchen tables. We hope these words help communicate the feelings we are taking home from Conference:

“In the beginning / meets / Dearly beloved / meets / Once upon a time.”
(Matt Harvey, *Becoming a Caterpillar*)

Signed in and on behalf of Senior Conference,

Calum Montell-Boyd and Naomi Alderson
Clerks