

Senior Conference Epistle 2009

To all Friends everywhere,

From 22nd to 29th August 2009, 79 young Friends and 14 over-20s gathered together at Sibford School for Senior Conference. Our theme for the week was *'Struggling with our values'*.

From their origins, Quakers have had an involvement with criminal justice, as inmates, support workers, and reformers. Heather and Mike gave a talk on their experiences as Quaker Prison Chaplains, which compelled us to question our preconceptions of what it is to be a criminal. They asked us to consider the motives behind criminal actions, which helped us to understand and empathise with prisoners. Indeed, Mike spoke about how 'normal' the prisoners are – that we could easily be in their position, or they in ours. Our speakers' personal accounts granted us an insight into the diversity of prison communities – people of all ages, races, and professions. This talk addressed the difficulty of reconciling different Quaker values, for example, compassion for prisoners with concern for victims.

Mat Paskins, one of our coordinators, spoke about similar ideals but from a different viewpoint. Using personal experiences, he discussed the need to describe the realities of love from a homosexual perspective, rather than focussing solely on legal equality. Many thoughtful questions followed the talk, raising issues about the struggle for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender rights, and how to break the links between homosexuality and victimhood.

Harvey Gillman, a prominent Quaker author, celebrated the importance of struggling for moral integrity, even where it cannot be achieved. Taking an autobiographical tone, he spoke of how he grappled with the challenges he faced on his spiritual journey, including his Jewish roots, Eastern European heritage, and his present life as a Quaker. Conferees enjoyed his passionate and fresh perspective on the Quaker testimonies. In later discussions, we considered the difficulties we experience in living out our own values.

We were inspired by Candia Crosfield and Dave Cullen's talk about their work for Quaker Peace and Social Witness. They described their year-long placements in peace charities: Candia at Peace Child International, and Dave at Campaign Against Depleted Uranium. This session was distinctive because we were able to relate to them

as young people, which helped them to create a relaxed atmosphere in which people felt even more at ease to ask questions. We were impressed by their optimistic approach, which was summed up by an analogy about a beach full of washed-up starfish. Even throwing one back in the sea can make a difference – at least to the individual.

Participants regularly came together in the same groups of seven or eight young people, called base groups, which enabled us to form closer relationships. Discussions in these smaller groups allowed conferees to explore more fully the issues raised during speaker sessions. Group games gave us the chance to bond and enjoy each other's company. With great enthusiasm, we also participated in workshops such as African drumming, arts and crafts, and sport.

We met for Meeting for Worship twice daily, at morning prologue and candle-lit epilogue. These meetings were moving and creative, from the floating candle lantern on the first night, to using Tibetan prayer flags for written ministry. The strong feeling of community and safe atmosphere was reflected by insightful ministry contributed by many different people. Our Elders' choice of readings deepened our understanding of the theme, none more so than a description of the struggle in maintaining our values in ever-shifting circumstances. *"We live on the wave's edge, where sea, sand, and sky are all mixed up together...because it is exciting, and it feels like the right place to be."* QFPS, 20.06

Our entertainments added a playful tone to the atmosphere of Conference. A lively Ceilidh helped us to get to know each other. We had fun constructing pharmaceutical transportation vehicles from cardboard, which ranged from a train to a Tardis. The themed meal created an enjoyable sense of bewilderment, as Teletubbies dined with zombies, and domestic superheroes feasted with the Ancient Greeks. At the disco, the conferees dazzled each other with their 80s dance moves and colourful costumes. A more relaxed evening's entertainment was provided by the quiz and by a night walk, which returned us to a feeling of calm.

We leave this week with a sense of optimism – sad to leave such a loving community, yet feeling empowered to try to make change. As Harvey Gillman said, *"It's not that we get it right that counts, it's that it's worth the struggle."*

Signed on behalf of all at Senior Conference,

Will Thurston and Ellen Rignell,
Clerks