

Senior Conference Epistle 2008

To All Friends Everywhere

On the 16th August 2008, 95 young people and 12 over 20s met at Sibford School for a week of Senior Conference.

Although the theme for our week was ‘Winners and Losers?’ it proved to be more of a gateway towards deeper, sometimes darker, areas of discussion. Tim Newell, one of our visiting speakers, spoke on his work with Circles of Support and Accountability for sex offenders, and provoked many questions. He talked of a moral panic that made most of us forget the need to recognise the human in everyone. This theme of moral panic continued with Moazzam Begg’s uncompromising description of his imprisonment in Bagram Detention Centre and Guantanamo Bay. His inspirational forgiving approach to the soldiers who guarded and interrogated him was at odds with the injustice we all felt on his behalf. His experience left us shocked, but uplifted at the strength of his human spirit.

Marian Liebmann, another visiting speaker, gave us a talk on Restorative Justice, which works to reconcile victims and offenders in a non-punitive fashion. She put forward the view that the traditional criminal justice system in this country makes losers of victims and offenders alike, whereas the Restorative Justice method seeks to make justice a positive process. Empathy was also a key theme of the over 20 talk, given by Keith, Maggie and Huw, on Quaker testimonies. They drew on their own personal experiences, such as Maggie’s upbringing in apartheid South Africa, in order to help us relate to their views on peace, truth and integrity. This helped us to put our own Quaker identity into perspective, and many found this session to be particularly insightful as it was easier to relate to speakers we already knew.

Many found the simpler prologues and epilogues to be challenging, but the deep silence gave us an opportunity for expression that reflected the mature themes of the speakers. Some powerful ministry led us to consider our own priorities, and come to the conclusion that it is breadth, not length, of life that matters. We were reminded that we are all ‘extraordinary people’ and that at the end of our lives it is the love we shall leave behind, not the material possessions.

Although we dealt with serious questions, a sense of fun was an integral part of conference. The pleasure of silly games, which we often neglect in our everyday lives, helped keep us buoyant and joyful. Evening entertainments were an important part, allowing conferees to unwind by building cardboard dens, going on a night walk, racing around on a treasure hunt or bopping at the pyjama disco.

Having fun was also important in base group sessions - these smaller groups supported us and helped us feel comfortable enough to share ideas freely within the group. Occasions such as the theme meal united the groups and saw base groups dressed as cheerleaders, scarecrows and the cast of a silent movie, amongst others, descend upon the dining hall. During the week we took part in workshops, enjoyable on different levels; some were energetic and sporty, whilst others were creative or discussion-based. They were enjoyed by all as an opportunity to let off steam and meet new people.

Conference has been fun, friendly and demanding, helping us to look at our beliefs about winners and losers. It’s easy to join a moral panic and label others, but in doing this we can lose sight of the ‘extraordinary person’ that exists in everyone. We leave conference refreshed by the spirit, optimism and love of this week, determined to ‘let our lives speak.’

Signed in and on behalf of Senior Conference
Ruth Jesson-Smith and Will Rowland, Clerks.