

Senior Conference Epistle 2010

To all friends everywhere,

From 21st to 28th of August 2010, 90 young Quakers aged 15 – 18 and 13 adult volunteers aged over 22 came together at Sibford School, Oxfordshire to consider the theme of “Simple Riches”.

While structured sessions helped us to explore living simply, we also felt empowered to simply live, together. All participants at Senior Conference made an effort to include those who might otherwise be excluded, which was especially important with the many newcomers to the event. It was easy to recognise the tight-knit social community after only a day of being together. Before Conference, “base groups” of nine or fewer participants had been set up to be facilitated by young people, and during the week these became supportive family units that met regularly to socialise and have discussions. These gave us the opportunity to meet across the boundaries of age, gender, culture and previous experience of Quaker events. Against this backdrop of a supportive community, we felt able to reflect on simplicity without being judged.

In worship the theme inspired a large flow of ministry that brought out the idea that our most valuable riches are our relationships. Nevertheless, our struggles with relationships, including those involving illness, death and anger, made it clear that they are far from simple to maintain. Many of the vulnerabilities in our most important relationships were shared during worship, and we felt accepted in our pain, as much as in our joy. Silence and ministry were foundations of this Senior Conference and by the second half of the week extended meetings for worship were introduced, and these became a comforting place to express our spirituality openly.

Advices and Queries 41 reads: “Try to live simply. A simple lifestyle freely chosen is a source of strength. Do not be persuaded to buy what you do not need...”. Such a focus on ethical spending was touched upon by Huw Still, an adult volunteer at the event. He explained to us his skip-diving, where kilos of good-quality food are salvaged from supermarket bins. Equally, we learnt of the difficulties of obsessing over ethical spending, when Huw had been faced with the dilemma of paying hundreds to travel to New York for his twin brother's wedding. Ros McCarthy and James Barnard, who also volunteer with us, spoke openly about their struggles with the testimony to simplicity, and the importance of simplicity to them on a personal, rather than social, level. Ros had attempted to live more self-sufficiently for four years in Cornwall and James had taken inspiration and strength from setbacks in his life. Hearing more deeply about the lives of those among us, and reflecting on them in smaller “base group” sessions, brought us closer to the experiences that they were sharing.

Being able to express vulnerability and feeling accepted as ourselves made Senior Conference feel like a home. Jennifer Kavanagh explored with us the countless definitions of home, be they places, people or emotions, that she had researched in writing *The “O” of Home*. Geoffrey Durham, who has had a career in showbusiness, explained his changed attitude to his own and others' vulnerabilities, in his seeking to “be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle”, a Platonic teaching.

A physically, spiritually and emotionally intense week was balanced with a strong sense of celebration and freedom that was not dampened by the steady downpour of rain throughout the week. During a themed meal, we shared good food while being dressed as glam rockers, trees and cartoon characters, among other things. From building spaghetti towers to dancing in flippers at the "Under the Sea" disco and from workshops making music to squelching through mud and juggling, we took advantage of the time to relax.

This Senior Conference has enabled many people to consider different aspects of their own and others' lives. Here it has seemed easier to live simply and appreciate the riches that come with that. We have gathered memories here that we will treasure: of hugging, of swapping friendship bracelets, of songs and art, of friends and support, of silence and laughter - our simple riches.

Signed on behalf of all at Senior Conference,

Sally Oliver and Sam Sender

Clerks