

Magical moments

Imran Tyabji speaks to Elinor Smallman about summer events for Young Friends

It's the end of a long, tiring day. A hundred teenagers and volunteers come together, sitting on chairs, cross-legged or lying down... the floor is a sea of flickering candlelight. Someone begins to sing, strumming gently on a guitar. Later a torch is switched on and somebody else reads a poem. Ministry flows. Here is a place where the young start to feel safe, where they share what is really bothering them.

Such magical epilogues are one of the many highlights described by Imran Tyabji, clerk to Friends Southern Summer Events (FSSE). FSSE organises two week-long events each August: the southern summer school (11 to 14 year olds) and the senior conference (15 to 18 year olds).

As a grassroots organisation, FSSE is able to carve out unique and meaningful events for the young Friends who attend – due in no small part to the strong role that participants and volunteers have in planning them. The senior conference is planned by a committee of seventeen and eighteen year olds whilst the majority of the adult volunteers are in their twenties and thirties. Imran feels that this is what makes these and other young people's events so vibrant: 'this isn't the future of the Society – it's the present – this is where the real Quakerism is happening.'

Activities vary from year to year, depending on the skills adult volunteers can bring. They range from sports such as tennis and football through to art, creative writing, discussion groups and circus skills. Visitors are invited to run workshops linked to a central theme: for example, last year they focused on 'Dealing with conflict as a Quaker'. There are fancy dress events, socials and outings to either Cambridge or Oxford, hosted by the local Meetings.

Meeting for Worship is held twice a day for half an hour. This is regularly held up as the highlight for many participants. Imran says: 'This is their worship, they get used to something that will stay with them for life'. One teenager who attended the summer school

said, 'Worship was a really special time for me. The silence is beautiful.'

'It's difficult to get them to come the first time – "it'll be so uncool" ... "it'll be awful" – then they go once and they're hooked. It kickstarts their spiritual lives,' says Imran. He speaks of the events as 'one of the most vital parts of my Quaker life' and highlights the sense of equality and inclusiveness as essential to their success. 'Equality is not lectured, it is lived and felt'. The inclusive and supportive atmosphere is highly valued by young Friends, 'you often hear "This is where I feel I can be truly me, and it keeps me going the rest of the year"'

The volunteers run a lean machine. The costs, predominantly paying the host schools, are covered by the participants' fees. Imran says: '[The schools] seem to value us as much as we value them. That's why the fees are very reasonable (currently £305 for the week including board and lodging).'

However, not every parent can afford this and FSSE strongly believes that no young person should be prevented from attending because of money. 'We give bursaries where necessary but the reality is that we could not afford more than a small handful. Luckily, most of the bursary support is given by Local and Area Meetings – we are very aware that it is an essential factor in making the whole wonderful enterprise work and we are very grateful.'

There is still time to apply to attend either the southern summer school or senior conference. Visit www.fsse.org.uk for an application form.

Although FSSE caters primarily for a southern catchment area, other regions have similar events. All regions will be welcoming of those who aren't able to attend locally for some reason. For further information: www.yqspace.org.uk/whats-happening

Imran is clerk of FSSE

Elinor is production editor of the Friend.