

Working with others to make a difference.

My name is Bernadette O'Shea, my parents were Irish migrant workers who came to live in the UK in the early 1950s. My mother was a cleaner and my father was a building labourer. I started attending Meeting for Worship in 1998 and was accepted into membership in 2010. I live, work and worship in West London.

To quote from Faith and Practice (Queries 1964)

'Are you working towards the removal of social injustices? Have you attempted to examine their causes objectively, and are you ready to abandon old prejudices and think again? Do you, as disciples of Christ, take a living interest in the social conditions of the district in which you live? Do you seek to promote the welfare of those in any kind of need and a just distribution of the resources of the world?'

Citizens UK was established twenty years ago by Neil Jameson, and Eric Adams from the Barrow Cadbury Quaker Trust. Neil is himself a member of the Society of Friends, he modelled the organisation partly on the Civil Rights Movement in the US but also on early UK examples of civil society organisations – including the Diggers, the Chartist, and the Suffragettes. Citizens UK has over 400 institutions in membership from all sections of civil society (faith groups, trade unions, schools and colleges, universities and refugee groups) and organizes for social justice outcomes in London, Birmingham, Nottingham, Cardiff, Leeds, Newcastle, Milton Keynes and through over 100 Refugee Welcome Groups across the country.

London West Area Meeting is a member of Citizens UK and I am one of the Quaker activists supporting that work.

The campaigning work of Citizens starts with an analysis of power; the power of the State, the power of the market, and the power of civil society. Quakers are often reluctant to talk about power, we know how destructive power can be, but 'Power is also the ability to act', it's about holding a vision of the world as you would like it to be and then using individual and collective energy to work for that vision. Citizens methods are based on tried and tested approaches, working with organized money and organized people. That's why Citizens, like the Society of Friends, takes money seriously. So that Citizens can stand on its own and pay its way, all the member groups pay annual dues from £700 to £5,000.

Citizens recognize that self-interest is key to understanding power so Citizen engagement starts with the question, what is your self-interest? From the perspective of London West Area meeting our self-interests are a mixture of specific requests....more affordable housing; local Government support for refugee welcome projects; employers committing to the London Living wage...but there are also our self-interest as Quakers...how do we continue to thrive as a worshipping community? How do we draw new people to the Society? How do we build relationships between our members and other local institutions who share our commitment to social justice? Our view is that one way to do this, is to be seen to be active in our own localities, concerned with the issues that affect local people and modelling effective organizing for change.

So how does it work on a day to day basis? The first step is to build 'relational power' within our own institutions. This has meant putting time aside to really get to know each other within our local meetings and area meetings by planning one to one sessions where we get below the surface and try to understand better what concerns us... this is then extended to conversations with other institutions. Citizens like Quakers start from the lived experience of individuals...finding, listening and working with Citizens who face day to day challenges of poverty, homelessness, exile.

This mobilization of 'relational power' with the testimony of individuals forms the basis for organizing actions. In Citizens work all actions are based on an analysis of who holds the power? What are their self-interests? And how can we use the action to push further on our requests.

Let me give an example of an action I was involved in last year. Leading up to the London Mayoral election in 2016, London Citizens agreed to hold a Citizens Assembly with the two main candidates to put to them the Citizen proposals for their term in office. The most important proposal was for a working relationship during their four year term. A venue was booked and across London each institution was asked to commit to getting their members to the event. The target number was 6,000 people. London West Area Meeting pledged 300 people, on the day our turn out was 230...making us the largest institutional presence from West London. At the Assembly individual citizens told their personal stories to the candidates and in front of the 6,000 Citizen, our leaders negotiated with the candidates to secure their commitment to our proposals...more truly affordable homes, development of community land trusts, London Living wage for all organisations that provide services to the GLA, more support for youth employment services. Since this meeting leader representatives have met with the now elected Mayor to secure his ongoing commitment to our requests, and to continue to hold him to account.

So finally why do I think it is important as a Quaker to organize in this way?

First we believe that our faith should translate into action, second our testimonies guide our commitment to working for social justice and finally by building relational power we are strengthening the bonds within our individual meetings but also modelling to others how our faith guides our ministry. We become known in our communities as activists for local concerns, thereby drawing more people to us and strengthening our local meetings. Oh and we have lots of fun and make lots of new friends in our own neighbourhoods.