

A new Quaker Meeting's story

Richard Bush



The journey and experience of being a new Quaker Meeting in Wimborne Minster, Dorset.

Wimborne Quaker Meeting, in Dorset, will be three years old at the end of this year. Wimborne Minster is a small market town on the edge of Bournemouth and Poole. We began as a monthly Sunday evening worshipping group of Poole Meeting, in the home of a disabled Friend, more than twenty-five years ago. Our story reflects the importance of being faithful to leadings, when these may not be clear for a long time. We now have a community of some thirty-five Friends, more than half that number being at Meeting for Worship each Sunday, having started with just eight of us. Most Wimborne Friends have been attending for less than three years, yet have “dived off the deep end” in becoming committed during this time, several having become members.

How and why has this happened? What can be learnt from this story? I hope to distil what has been important in this process. I shared this recently at Quaker Life Representative Council, when it was suggested that Friends more widely might find it helpful to hear our story, through Quaker Voices. My wife, Ruth, also a Friend of long standing, has added helpful insights. The heart of our life is in our worship together, coupled with regular opportunities for learning and for getting to know one another “in those things that are eternal”.

It was a slow, gradual process of growth, linked to close connections ecumenically in Wimborne, and to our decision to hold Quaker Quest, first in Poole and then in Wimborne, some ten years ago. Shortly before then, when it felt right to hold our second evening meeting for worship in a public building, rather than a private house, we were invited to use the Methodist Church lounge. We continued to meet as well every first

Sunday evening in the disabled Friend's home until 2015. Quaker silence and stillness is much appreciated by local people attending churches in the town.

After three years of preparation, Quaker Quest in Wimborne drew over sixty to the four evening sessions. We became better known and understood locally as a result. Having been a Friend for over forty years, I have always had a commitment to wanting to help others to find us; being a Friend is at the heart of my life. This feeling is shared by others in our Meeting. Numbers attending increased at our evening meeting for worship, and we added a third Sunday evening, simultaneously continuing to be much involved in the life of Poole Meeting, with worship on Sunday mornings.

We began to feel led towards a morning Meeting for Worship, requiring a change of venue from the Methodist Church and moved to a local day centre, where we introduced a morning meeting for worship, once a month, alongside our two Sunday evenings. At this time, we received an invitation from Churches Together, to lead the ecumenical evening service in the Minster Church in the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. Programmed worship, with a twenty minutes of guided stillness in the "sermon slot", was attended by some eighty people from other churches. This raised our profile and gave us the opportunity to announce our change of location.

Our numbers continued to grow, especially those from a non-church background, and a second Sunday morning meeting was introduced. A strong sense of community had grown in Wimborne, with the small core group also being fully involved in the life of Poole Meeting too. It became an often tiring process, between our two Quaker communities in Poole and in Wimborne, opening up and setting out chairs on a Sunday evening in Wimborne, having perhaps been a part of the children's meeting team at Poole in the morning.

It was a challenge for both communities, when the new life became a more separated life, a community in its own right. In many ways it felt like being a child leaving home, leaving parents behind! All of us felt a part of Area Meeting but less bound up together in our spiritual journeys. A growing sense of leading that we should become our own Quaker Meeting emerged. Two threshing meetings were arranged, one in Poole,

one in Wimborne, followed by a meeting for clearness for us all. These meetings were deeply grounded occasions, with many Friends present.

The decision was made that Wimborne should become a new Local Meeting. Area Meeting confirmed our sense of leading, and we began a weekly Sunday morning meeting for worship in January 2014, becoming a separate Local Quaker Meeting in January 2015. The heart of our life has been in worship, learning and building community together. We are grounded in worship, in all that we do. We have co-clerks, four Elders, four Overseers, a Treasurer and a Librarian, also a nominations committee. Initially we needed the financial support of Poole Meeting to pay the rent. Friends' giving in Wimborne has risen steadily, and we are now able to pay our own way.

Throughout our beginnings, we have written occasional news reports for the local free newspaper, through which many have found us. We now also have an advertisement in our local Post Office. We hold a Meeting for worship for business in alternate months. We seek to develop a culture in which the leadings of the Spirit are the bedrock of all we do. Guidance on our worshipful approach is given as an introduction to each meeting for worship for business, as most Friends have less than three years' experience. We use threshing and clearness processes fairly often in making decisions. Our Spiritual Review for 2016 to 2017 grew from this approach and was prepared by a small group of Friends, only one "seasoned". It includes cartoons!

Being a Meeting "without a house" is liberating to those of us who, as seasoned Friends, have used much energy on premises matters, but it also has its challenges. We were evicted from the day centre a year ago, so had to find a new place and now meet in the Town Hall. We put out furniture each week, and put it back later. Our Meeting library is used extensively, with books being purchased and added regularly. Books are put out each week on a table, which acts as a quiet corner for Friends after meeting for worship, and a focus for discussion/questions.

Learning is a priority expressed by newer Friends. Meeting for Learning was established on alternate Thursday evenings. We followed the Quaker Faith and Practice reading programme as well as other subjects. We have used the Being Friends Together website extensively. It has been most valuable. Our monthly Meeting for Sharing was established in 2017, as a

daytime opportunity to meet and reflect on Quakerism informally, whilst our evening Meeting for Learning is now monthly. In addition, a group of Wimborne Friends decided to read the Bible in a year. They reflected together monthly, over breakfast, in the local Wetherspoons' pub!



We continue to get to know one another "in those things that are eternal", in which coffee mornings, shared lunches and pub meets have all developed as a part

of our shared life. As a new community, we have had an "inreach" focus. We are gradually moving towards outward concerns. We have focussed upon connecting with local Muslims, through the Islamic Centre in Bournemouth. Dialogue has followed and two Friends have assisted in a refugee English class. We've recently become a Sanctuary Meeting, so this connection and commitment will develop further, as we seek to welcome everyone, including refugees and asylum seekers. Our welcome is seen as a special part of the community that we are building. We also have a connection to the local food bank, through a Wimborne Friend.

We are about to start our second triennium as a Local Quaker Meeting. Two of our newer members have agreed to serve as Elder and Overseer, alongside more experienced Friends. We do not have a Children's Meeting and would like to have one eventually. We hope to set up a regular Meeting for Healing soon. Contact with other churches continues to be strong, with an ecumenical representative from our Meeting. Vibrancy is also at the heart of our life: we enjoy worshipping together, learning together and having fun together! Ripples do occur, as in any community where we share our lives so deeply, not necessarily having known each other for that long. We strive to be open to one another, and to trust the leadings of the spirit, as we move forward. We have lost two Friends, and celebrated the grace of God as shown in their lives. We witnessed the marriage of two Friends of our Meeting in September, at their Meeting for Worship for marriage, a day of great joy!

Richard Bush is a member of Bournemouth Coastal Area Meeting.