

Friday evening.

As we've heard, last year Friends were distressed by the inequality and injustice that is so evident all around us, and by a sense of powerlessness. We urged each other to engage; and to uphold and own the work of Friends across the Yearly Meeting. We asked Meeting for Sufferings to encourage and coordinate this work. In February, Sufferings representatives were asked to share their stories of witness - concerns that had been tested, adopted and acted on by Quaker Meetings.

In collating the responses, it proved difficult to disentangle our ongoing work on peace and sustainability from more recent issues. They are all interconnected, all of a piece. But six broad themes emerged. Economic justice, peace, refugees and asylum seekers, sustainability, housing and homelessness, and criminal justice.

I have the privilege of being a member of Meeting for Sufferings. It's been heartening and inspiring to hear these stories. Many of us have heeded the inward light, and acted on it collectively. From large projects to small-scale actions, many Friends have been active, engaged and faithful.

I can't list everything, but here is a flavour. Between us.... we have tried to make our Meetings and our Meeting Houses more environmentally friendly. We have put our property to work, making our buildings available for groups, and charities, and to support our neighbours in need. We have converted a building into a Peace Hub. We have spoken our truth through holding public events, and by arranging meetings with politicians, including the chancellor of the exchequer. We have set up interest groups that enable us to inform Friends and speak knowledgeably to decision-makers. We have welcomed, befriended, fed and sheltered refugees. We have put our money to good use, divesting from fossil fuels and giving financial help where it is likely to make a difference. We have held vigils, hosted speakers, joined marches, laid wreaths of white poppies and of olive branches. We have promoted a memorial to the victims of war. We have challenged militarism in all its aspects. We have celebrated and upheld the right to refuse to kill. We have worked to promote peace in schools. We have helped set up a Circle of Support and Accountability and introduced Quiet Spaces in prisons.

Across our Yearly Meeting, at least 76 actions are being taken by Area Meetings, and at least 123 actions by Local Meetings. We have worked together as groups of Friends, and we have worked with others where it has added strength to our witness.

Have we changed the world? Well, perhaps not quite yet. But small changes add up to larger ones, and we can never fully know the consequences of an act of faithful witness. We shouldn't underestimate the butterfly effect.

I'd like to tell you a bit more about some of these stories, stories of Friends acting together, using their gifts, their time, their money, their energy and their imagination, in response to the leadings of the Spirit.

Hearing that a local charity for families in need is to close, Friends in Croydon Meeting pull together to make sure its work can continue. Now, based in the Meeting House, the Friends' Family Group meets for ten sessions a term, supporting up to ten families at each session. It employs a play-leader, who is assisted by two volunteers from the Meeting.

In Mid-Wales, the tone of First World War commemoration leads to a broader shared concern about increasing militarisation, the glorification of violence, and a culture of bullying. Friends work closely with QPSW's Peace Education staff and with a local mediation programme, itself originally a Quaker initiative. Alongside paid facilitators, trained volunteers, nearly half of them from the Meeting, build up their confidence to run the programme in pairs. It is free to schools, and runs for 6 weeks at an hour a week, using a mixture of talking, sharing, games and stories. It includes self-awareness, handling anger, and the potential for cooperation. They have completed 27 programmes, and are now receiving requests to work with other age groups.

In response to the decision to bomb Syria, Sussex West Friends begin holding a series of vigils for peace outside the Meeting House, engaging with passers-by despite occasional hostility. Their next vigil will be on Armed Forces Day.

Friends in Southern East Anglia are moved to set up a working group on the plight of refugees. They decide early on to work with others, and discover a local organisation supporting refugees and asylum seekers. They learn of the costs involved in travelling into London for Home Office assessments. One of their first actions is to provide some financial support.

Meanwhile, the Local Meeting also helps fund an aid trip to Calais by another faith group, and the Area Meeting plays an active part in the local coalition Welcome Refugees Colchester. The Meeting holds tea parties from time to time for refugee families and their befriending groups. For a few months the group's convenor and his wife have hosted Hana, a Syrian woman who needed somewhere to stay while she applied for asylum. This has now been granted. Hana has a job and a place of her own.

Leicester Area Meeting's prison chaplain arranges with a prison to hold a Quiet Space once a fortnight – a reflective, respectful discussion group for people of any faith or none. She speaks to her local Meeting about it and Friends offer help and encouragement. Now six Quaker volunteers join with prisoners in the Quiet Space. As well as their practical engagement, the chaplain says 'Knowing there is this group of people I could call on, helps support me in my work.' Five Friends in Rugby Meeting volunteer in two other prisons.

A prisoner comments 'We sit together and try to find peace within ourselves which then seems to gather us into a silence. We do not go to Meeting to seek an escape from the stresses of life but to find strength to better handle the difficulties that life brings to most of us.'

These stories were all from Meetings. But respondents to the survey reported 116 times in total that they knew of Friends acting under concern individually. Five responded that although individuals or local Meetings were doing a lot of work, their

concerns had not been tested corporately. One said that although the Area Meeting had tested concerns, only a small number of Friends were actively engaged. Three respondents wrote that they did not understand the term 'tested concern'.

It wasn't clear how many of those individual Friends had asked their Meeting to test or support the leading that they felt. Are we perhaps not always willing to share what impels us to act? Or are we sometimes reluctant to submit to the discipline of testing by the Meeting? Our Friends in Junior Yearly Meeting urge us not to be afraid of the Light and how it may push us. We need not be afraid either of sharing that experience with our Meeting. It may give us, at the very least, loving support when we need it, and may itself be moved to engage with our concern and amplify our efforts.

And of course, whether or not we feel personally called to action, we can all contribute to the development of the loving, trusting, worshipping community in which our outward witness is rooted.