

Epistle from the Heads of Quaker Agencies meeting held in London, 6–8 December 2021

Eleven of us from seven international Quaker organisations have come together at Friends House London and online for a three-day gathering. We meet at a time of transition. The Covid pandemic has changed our lives and the societies we live in amplifying the inequalities which were already present. The work of our family of Quaker organisations is also developing and evolving, responding to these changes and to the new leadings we are given to follow. And it is a time of transition in the leadership of many of our organisations – five of the seven will have new leadership from 2022.

We gather because our work is connected. As Quaker service agencies we stand together in our witness to the world. We know that a just and peaceful world is possible, and that by working alongside one another we bring it closer than if we work alone. We seek relationships of trust and collaboration between Quaker organisations, bringing the strengths of each to the work we are all called to. Our legitimacy to speak and act on behalf of Quakers stems from a process of discernment, discovering as best we can God's will in the matters before us. Anyone can be part of this discernment, Quaker or not, and we all benefit when diverse participants are involved. Others can see things and bring insights we do not; we understand the importance of taking a lead from those most impacted by oppression.

In reflecting back on our work together we value the opportunity our Heads of Agencies group allows us to share experiences, providing a source of support and spiritual grounding. Our connection provides the space for us to think about how we connect with Quaker voices around the world. One of our organisations can often offer deep expertise or subject knowledge on behalf of all of us. At times we are challenged by issues of scale as it can be difficult for our smaller organisations to maintain many relationships. Tensions that arise could be resolved if we go one level deeper, name what we're trying to achieve, and share each other's theories of change.

Together we have celebrated the steadfast and faithful service of Diane Randall, Andrew Tomlinson and Jonathan Woolley, each of them leaving after more than ten years in post. We have learned much from their experience, their generosity with their gifts and their friendship, and are full of gratitude for their public ministry as well as their relationships with each of us as inspiring colleagues. They leave with our thanks, and our love.

We have welcomed too those taking up positions of leadership in our organisations, and those who are looking after organisations during times of transition. Our meeting has been much enriched by the opportunity to bring together in one place the insights and experience of those laying down their service with the energy and

openness of those taking on new responsibilities. We wish Sarah Clarke, Tim Gee, Bridget Moix and Nozizwe Madlala-Routledge well as they take up this work.

We have explored the difference between climate justice and sustainability. We recognise the need to look at the climate crisis holistically, as a social, political, ethical and spiritual issue, beyond a focus exclusively on emissions targets and personal lifestyle change. We see that those who are most affected are the least responsible, and that their voices are often silenced. We place the need for justice at the heart of our response, advocating solutions that redistribute power away from dominant states and commercial interests, and centre the most affected. We shared examples of taking a justice-based approach to climate action in our work and reflected on the positive impact of a strong Quaker voice at COP26 in November 2021.

We have been led to explore how we are called to engage in ‘peacebuilding at home’, what that may entail in our different contexts, and how it relates to closing space for civil society and dismantling systems of oppression. We recognise a need to confront the violence that exists in global North countries and to work to address the root causes of violence and injustice wherever we engage in peacebuilding efforts. We see advancing justice as fundamental to peacebuilding and the need to listen and learn more from those most affected by violence and injustice.

We reaffirm our commitment to dismantle and prevent the presence of institutional oppression within the lives of our organisations. Walking alongside one another, we commit to doing better in creating welcoming, affirming and supporting work environments for staff and volunteers, both in policies and practice. We have explored what it means to be an anti-racist and anti-oppression organisation and recognise that more work is essential to build our shared understanding. We emphasise the need for staff initiatives to go hand-in-hand with intentional and accountable governance efforts; while encouraging and allowing space for discomfort and difficult conversations. While centring the leadings of those most adversely impacted by oppression, we acknowledge that we should not overburden them with the work that needs to be shouldered by those holding power.

We have considered the future of multilateralism, where countries can work together for the common good, beyond their self-interest. QUNO is part of this, helping build understanding, using human connections alongside technical knowledge, finding opportunities for cooperation not conflict. We recognise threats to the legitimacy of the multilateral system whether by disruptive state actors or the experience of those in situations of conflict that the UN is just a ‘guest walking by’. In seeking a vision of how we could help improve international relations at the UN and reform the ways its institutions work, we are reminded of its powerful original vision to “save future generations from the scourge of war” and of justice as expressed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

As we reach the end of our time together we call on Friends to be humble and to be bold, to be faithful and determined, to work inwardly and outwardly, within our Quaker communities and outside them, to build the just and peaceful world God tells us can be ours.

In peace and with love,

- Joyce Ajlouny, General Secretary, American Friends Service Committee
- Atiaf Alwazir, Head of Peace Programme, Quaker Council for European Affairs
- Sarah Clarke, incoming Director, Quaker United Nations Office New York
- Nozizwe Madlala-Routledge, incoming Director, Quaker United Nations Office Geneva
- Susanna Mattingly, acting General Secretary, Friends World Committee for Consultation
- Bridget Moix, incoming General Secretary, Friends Committee on National Legislation
- Paul Parker, Recording Clerk, Britain Yearly Meeting
- Diane Randall, outgoing General Secretary, Friends Committee on National Legislation
- Oliver Robertson, General Secretary, Quaker Peace & Social Witness
- Andrew Tomlinson, outgoing Director, Quaker United Nations Office New York
- Jonathan Woolley, outgoing Director, Quaker United Nations Office Geneva