

YMG 2017 Sunday morning session Elizabeth Allen's introduction

Living out our faith in the world – our journey so far.

We come together at Yearly Meeting and Yearly Meeting Gathering in our hundreds - a transformed people, transforming the world. Over the past two years, as we have reflected on what it means to live out our faith in the world, we have been enlightened, inspired and challenged to take heed of the promptings of love and truth in our hearts. It is love, which draws us into the world and pulls us towards its brokenness.

What is our vision for a better future, indeed for a new social order? *“If we were living our testimonies, what would the world be like?”* What makes the real difference is not adding further to the words in the world but living out our vision, building a better future.

What are we called on to witness to today?

Our world is being trashed by human selfishness and greed and there is increasing inequality, resulting in misery and pain, especially for the poor and vulnerable. This distresses us greatly. Individually and with other Quakers locally and nationally we are working to help alleviate this pain.

So that we might know what is happening in our local meetings, at Yearly Meeting 2015 we asked Meeting for Sufferings to encourage and co-ordinate the work of Friends across Yearly Meeting. In response to this, Meeting for Sufferings collated the stories of our witness. The list of what we do is long and includes economic injustice, peace building, sustainability, helping refugees and asylum seekers, housing and homelessness, and criminal justice.

We are not a campaigning organization and it is important that we articulate what we do in terms of our faith. As a spirit led people, over the centuries we have developed discernment practices to help us be clear about our direction and the steps we have to take. At the heart of these practices is the testing of our concerns. Where does this concern come from – our intellect, our ego or the Spirit? Together in our gathered meetings, we listen deeply, we wait prayerfully and when the time is right we act faithfully. Are we ready for action, expecting to be called? Are we learning to dwell in that place where leadings come from: are we willing to be led?

We have shared our experience of the Light and what it feels like to be pushed to act, and how acting under concern is life changing. We have heard of that moment when we step away from all that we know and rely on in our lives into what may feel like an abyss and of how courage comes from our faith that, as one Friend put it, there will be earth upon which to stand or we will be given wings.

We have reflected on our spiritual gifts, and of how what makes something a gift of the Spirit is not the gift itself but the way we use it to make a difference in the world. Taking action, living out our faith, is not an end in itself, it brings new light, transforms our lives, deepens our faith, making us more open to divine guidance. We are all worshippers and we are all activists.

Sometimes our call is just to be there.

“ Here I stand, I could do no other.” Martin Luther

This ministry of presence is something we do and have always done: we engage; we witness; we walk alongside. It is one of the ways we live out our faith in the world.

Whatever we are led to do as individuals, collectively we need to understand the big picture and take a holistic approach. The connectedness of all things is reflected in our testimonies. Degradation of the environment, social and economic injustice and violence in society, the issues Friends are most concerned about, are linked. By asking the question, what brings about these ills, it is likely that we will unearth the same root causes. Tackling systemic injustice and the powers that maintain it, is challenging. Are we part of the problem?

Quakers are by no means alone in seeking to build a fairer society. We work with others, valuing community and unity of purpose. Through our experience, we already know that change happens and lasts when people come together and stay together in co-ordinated movements that insist on change. We join those movements, which we see as doing God's work. We look for that of God in organisations as well as individuals; a movement is people. We bring our tools and skills with us. We may be there for the long or the short term. We may work locally, nationally or globally.

We have a sense that, in the context of cuts, of climate change, of poverty, a great people is gathering already. What is our role? Are we like John the Baptist more comfortable in the wilderness, existing prophetically but peripherally? Or are we willing to join with our communities to turn the tables at the temple, if necessary? At Yearly Meeting last year we were asked to reflect on these questions.

This week we will conclude our reflection on 'Living out our faith in the world'. Starting with the leadings of our heart, we will acknowledge and celebrate the passion that drives our witness. We will be learning how by using our head we might harness that energy effectively, so that we, and others can be empowered to add to movements for change. We will be reminded that in our ways of working and approaches to Quaker work, we can identify transferable hands-on skills we can bring to our work with others. We will share how we are finding others in our communities by using our feet to get out there. Finally, we will ask, "What does God require of us?"