

Lesley Richards – Saturday AM

Setting the scene

(1) For the last 4 years I have been clerk to the Book of Discipline Revision Preparation Group, or RPG for short. As you know YM 2014 considered revising the current Quaker Faith and Practice but was not united so MfS set up the Revision Preparation Group to advise them (MfS) about whether again to ask all of us (Yearly Meeting) about revising the book. We reported to them last December, advising them that the book needed revising and that it was time to ask again. This weekend we will be spending time looking at the various issues that Yearly Meeting needs to consider in taking a decision whether to start a revision or not.

There has been a continuous history of revision since the (2) manuscript version in 1782, but it is enough to make my point if we go through the last hundred years or so. Some feedback from a Friend suggested that the books of discipline were like a family portrait and from time to time they have to be updated because the younger generation was missing. So, I thought I'd illustrate the times when our Books of Discipline were updated with a series of family portraits of the specific Quaker family into which I have been accepted as an honorary member. The dates fit pretty well. So here is a photo of (3) Robin and Connie Appleton on their wedding day in about 1921. The 1921 book was the first to use extracts of Friends' writings, as they put it, *'to state truth, not by formulating it, but by expressing it through the vital personal and corporate experience of Friends.'* At the time there were three volumes, Christian Life Faith and Thought, Christian Practice and Church Government.

A generation later, here are (4) Robin and Connie again at their daughter's wedding which roughly coincides with the 1959 version. 'Christian Life Faith and Thought' and 'Christian Practice' were revised into 'Christian Faith and Practice'. Here is the copy I was given when I joined the Society of Friends.

(5) Church Government (those chapters which lay out how things should be done in our local, area and yearly meetings) was revised in 1906,1917,1931 and 1967. (6) Again, this is my copy. It's much less tatty, not because it was revised more recently, I was given both at the same time. It's simply that I haven't read it as much. Even though I was Monthly Meeting clerk, I only read it when I needed to find something specific. It is important to remember, at that time, the majority of Quakers had grown up in the Society of Friends. The book has advice to clerks, but nothing which straightforwardly explains how a business meeting, a meeting for worship for business, actually operates and why we do things this way. It has nothing, because it was not necessary at that time to state the obvious. The same cannot be said today when most of us, including myself, are convinced Friends.

It was Yearly Meeting in 1985 where the process of revision was started which led to the current single book and here (7) are Robin and Connie, about that date, at their grand-daughter's wedding. No big formal photos here. The revision committee's remit this time was not to alter the substance of Church Government; so it was reviewed and bits rewritten where it wasn't clear but lots of the words of these parts were untouched. The committee added in some bits to address the need to explain what we do, but the actual substance was not revised. Our ways of organising our life together as Quakers was seen to be a part and parcel of how we lived out our faith so it seemed right for it to be part of a single book. The Church Government sections were reordered to become part of the new Quaker Faith and Practice together with the selection of extracts that included old favourites along with new material. This new book was approved by Yearly Meeting in 1994. But even before revision started in 1985, there were signs that sticking to the letter of Church Government was difficult for small meetings. So, we have at present this book, approved in 1994, but where many church government sections are 50 years old and it reads like they are.

To complete the series of wedding pictures, here (8) is a photo of Robin and Connie's great grandson's recent wedding. They're not there in person of course, but their characteristic ways of approaching people are still very much in evidence in their descendants. Do we need a new Quaker Faith and Practice to include the next generation in our Quaker family portrait?

(9) Yes, we have one book with all the various different kinds of material, but that's not the end of the story. Largely because of changes in the law, there have needed to be changes, for example when we needed to work out how trustees fitted into Quaker structures. We have (10) editions 1,2,3,4 and 5. The marriage law changed to include same sex marriage, (11) so we have a new chapter 16 as a supplement. But that's still not the end. We did some minor updating yesterday evening. The Church Government Advisory group continues to work hard. (12) Nowadays, if you want to find out about Scottish prison visitors, (or are they chaplains?) you have to look on line for the completely up to date version. And that's still not all, there's a whole lot of supplementary material that is not in the book. (13) For example, there's a treasurer's handbook, looked after by the Stewardship committee, and information on safeguarding is updated by the member of Friends House staff whose job it is to keep abreast of best practice. (14) No one is suggesting that the correct name for Quakers who support Scottish prisoners which is in 'the book' is more important than the principle of safeguarding our children which isn't. It is just to do with the history of when such things were thought about. Minor updates won't sort out these inconsistencies and this is one reason we are recommending we do a proper revision.

In our current system there is confusion about what needs to be in the book approved by Yearly Meeting in session and what material needs to be, still be publicly available, but doesn't need that level of authority, it might be approved by some other appropriate committee. What we are suggesting is that we make it clear where we draw the line, so that we have core material in the book and supplementary material in another format. We will be looking at this in detail on the second half of Sunday morning.

RPG started by deliberately trying not to take a view about whether or not revision was necessary. It was when we looked closely into the church government parts, speaking to Friends involved in all sorts of ways, that we united as a group in agreeing that a revision is necessary. This focus on listening to others' views has been integral to our committee's ways of working. (15) One of the first things we worked on was the project to get Friends to actually read their Book of Discipline. The thinking was two-fold. When the question is, 'Does this book need revising?' you are better placed to answer if you have read it fairly recently. Our second reason was to help Friends to explore all sorts of aspects of their life together, listening lovingly to each other talking about God, about our faith.

The uptake of the 'Reading Quaker Faith and Practice project' was way beyond our expectations. Let's try it out, could you raise your hand if some Friends in your meeting have been involved in Reading Quaker Faith and Practice in the way we set out in the project. Yes, it would seem that many, many meetings have that experience, which means that this time we discuss our book at yearly meeting, we have mostly read it; not just cherry picked our favourite bits but explored its dustier corners as well. The slide show in here over our short break will show quotes taken from feedback to that project.

(16) As I have explained, there are problems with how we set out the way in which we organise our religious society. There is no consistency in how we deal with different issues; it's largely a matter of historical accident, which bits are decided in a full Yearly Meeting session and which bits are approved by some other group of Friends on our behalf. Approving every little change about every detail in a Yearly Meeting session would not be the best use of our time together (and I confess, making these changes is about my least favourite bit of Yearly Meeting.)

The Revision Preparation Group are recommending that this structure needs tidying up. (17) We suggest that we think in terms of Core and Supplementary material. The core would consist of a description of why we do things the way we do, for example, how we hold a business meeting and why we do it this way. The supplementary material would contain advice to clerks about how to draft minutes, how to keep adequate records etc. If you take the new chapter 16 on marriage, (18) the first section appears to contain the core material on the Quaker understanding of marriage. The other sections are mainly details about who does what and might be

published separately as supplementary material. The first is rightly the business of Yearly Meeting, the second might be more appropriately the responsibility of some other group such as MfS. Both need to be in the public domain. Friends have explained they want a 'book' that they can have to hand in Meeting for Worship, but there are other platforms available which we already use. The technology will continue to change, but we already make use of electronic ways of ensuring this material is available and it enables people to access the most up to date information.

If the first reason for recommending revision was that church government is not working well in some of our meetings, particularly the smaller ones, we wondered whether revision should stop there.

(19) In 2014 when YM started thinking about revising, one of the issues that really worried Friends then was referred to as theism / nontheism. When our group was set up, the issue was one of the main things we were asked to look at. RPG are very clear that this is not a helpful way of naming the issue. It suggests two opposing point of view, where the reality is that Friends have a multitude of different ways of understanding their Quaker faith. For me, for most of us, the word God is a valuable shorthand for an important part of our faith tradition. We can value God as a passionately real part of our daily experience, as a treasured part of our history even if we struggle to relate to the word for ourselves, or as a part of the experience of others which we love because we love those Friends. A binary split yes/no doesn't begin to describe the richness of where our Religious Society of Friends is today. Our group, RPG, refer to the issue as one of religious difference. Friends have already done a lot of work on our religious differences in reading Quaker Faith and Practice.

(20) Our other approach to this issue was to bring together a group of twenty or so Friends with a particular interest in theology, the theology think tank. It is a report of the conversations of this group that form the content of God, Words and Us which was part of the recommended spiritual preparation for this Yearly Meeting. Shall I try again? Put your hand up if Friends in your meeting have read God, Words and Us.

Having listened to both the feedback to the reading project and to the theology think tank, RPG have come to a view that what Quakers share (21) is a willingness to speak and to listen openheartedly; not just with our brains, but with our hearts as well. Listening openheartedly to someone you agree with is relatively easy. It's when what you're hearing is not what you would say or not how you would say it, that the challenge lies. We talk of trying to say what is on our heart and doing this in such a way that other Friends have a chance of hearing with their hearts is difficult. It is not simply that you are using different words that they may find uncomfortable, what you are trying to say may, in itself, be different from the understanding of the Friend you are talking to. How can you speak and listen openheartedly when the substance of the other's understanding is different from your own? Is it something to do with, 'listening to where the words come from'? Certainly, the mindset that if you don't agree with me you are both wrong and stupid, is not going to lead to successful communication, heart to heart. In the 1989 Swarthmore lecture, Jocelyn Burnell (22) talked about the difficulty of helping students get their heads round the idea that subatomic particles sometimes behave as if they are solid particles and sometimes as if they are waves. Does this comparison help explain how very different

experiences, different understandings can yet be compatible? (23) Aiming to speak and listen in this way, rather than a particular understanding of God and other theological matters, is what is distinctive about our Quaker approach,. It is not a cop out. It is very difficult. But it is in line with the traditional Quaker question, 'What canst thou say?' Our religious differences form the basis for this afternoon's considerations.

I would like to tell you of an exchange in my local Churches Together Committee meeting. You have to understand that we have a rather forceful, strongly evangelical rector. It fell to me to explain why some of us had difficulty with what he was proposing. When I had done, his response was, 'No one has ever said anything like that to me before.' Our chairman, bless him, said to the rector, 'No, I can believe that they haven't said that sort of thing to you, but I can also believe that they have said it to Lesley.' I was left asking myself if I was also a person to whom people would never say particular sorts of things. I think the honest answer is, yes, I can be. In this particular role on RPG however, Friends have said such a variety of different things to me, that I think I have managed this time mostly to listen, not just respectfully, but openheartedly.

(24) So, what we are recommending through Meeting for Sufferings is that we don't just do half a job, revising just church government. We recommend that the whole book needs looking at.

(25) We recommend that we try to separate more clearly core parts of church government, how we hold business meetings, what we understand by marriage etc, which would be an integral part of a new book. Supplementary material would be elsewhere and have the appropriate authority.

We recommend that we see our difference as our richness, not as some kind of flaw.

Finally, we would like to encourage any revision committee to be creative.

The personal bit

(26) Now I would like to speak personally about how I feel about the possibility of revising our book of discipline.

(27) The picture shows a road near me where a pothole has been patched and then more holes appeared round the patch, that have themselves been patched. Now another pothole has appeared nearby. There will come a point when patching the patches just won't do, resurfacing with another layer of tarmac isn't enough either, they will have to do a proper, more radical, job. We will complain when they do because it is right by the main set of traffic lights just on the way into town. But it is necessary if there is to be a satisfactory solution that, overall, will cost less. These potholes are close to my home, I'm sure you can think of bits of road near you that are in the same state. And so is our church government. I believe the point has come when patching the patches just won't do, resurfacing isn't enough either, we have to do a proper, more radical job. We will complain about it, but it is necessary if there is

to be a satisfactory solution, that, overall will cost less. In this case the cost is the cost of our time in trying to make things work.

As I explained, one of the pieces of feedback to the reading project, likened the book of discipline to a family photo. We need a new one because the younger members of the family weren't in the old photo. (27) This is a photo of me at about the time Yearly Meeting was beginning to think about starting the revision process that led to our current book. I was the youngest member of the department at work, I had my career before me. My colleagues were all single, white, childless, grammar school or private school educated, middle class, comfortably off and (at least publicly) we were all straight.

(28) This next photo shows me with my work colleagues today. I'm semi-retired, at the end of my career and the oldest person in the photo by more than 10 years. We are married, single, living with a partner, living with several generations of our family, with adult children, teenage children, young children, babies. We are not all white, straight or comfortable off. In the intervening years, I've experienced a lot, learned a lot and the world has changed around me. Only one other person in my department knows the dry feeling of having your hands covered in chalk dust, though most recognise the squeal that a piece of chalk sometimes makes. In other areas of my life too, a lot of water has flowed under the bridge and I've changed. This includes my religious life. I'm recognisably the same person and yet I'm not the same, I've moved on. Basically, what I'm trying to say, to those of us who remember the last revision, is that I've got older, (and so have you.) What is true for me as an individual is also true for the wider society as well as for the Society of Friends. The photo of the Religious Society of Friends in our current book is out of date, not only because it is missing younger Friends and newer Friends; it is missing that wider range of life experience among us and it is out of date, because older Friends have changed too.

I find that change exciting. I'm am enthusiastic about what we will learn if we embark on the adventure of revising our book together.