

**REVITALISING AREA MEETINGS ... *and other such matters*****Introduction**

Friends, thank you for today's invitation to contribute to your consideration of how East Sussex Area Meeting might move forward into the future. I'm hoping our conversation will be a useful starting point, or stop on the way, for your Area Meeting's journey in finding a way of managing your business. More importantly, enhancing Friends' spiritual experience of Area Meeting and coming together as Friends and as friends.

I'm Michael Long. Formerly Clerk to Northumbria Area Meeting. I've also served as Clerk to Hexham Local Meeting and Clerk to Friends House Library Committee. I'm currently Northumbria's representative to Quaker Life Representative Council and I'm on the Council's Planning Group, I'm an Alternate to Meeting for Sufferings, and I serve on Church Government Advisory Group and Central Nominations Committee.

Your Clerks very kindly circulated a paper which describes how Northumbria Area Meeting found a process of change and new arrangements which works for us. I hope you have had a chance to read the paper and reflect on the Table of Responsibilities which are attached to it. I'm not here to convince or convert you to the so-called "Northumbria Model". Most of what has been put in the public domain about Northumbria has been raised up by Meeting for Sufferings, BYM Stewardship Committee or references in The Friend.

I'm sure you are all aware that Area Meetings the length and breadth of Britain are looking at themselves and asking how can we be more inspiring as a spiritual community and more efficient as a community which has to manage its own business. There are a number of common and underlying issues which challenge Friends and their Area and Local Meetings. At Northumbria we have found a process and practice which works for us. You need to find a process and practice which works for you. Some of that might be derived from Northumbria, some from other Area Meetings which have changed or are in the process of change. You need to tailor an Area Meeting that fits East Sussex - your new form may even be unique.

What I hope to do today is to put some thoughts to you about Area Meetings, to recap the story of how Northumbria Area Meeting made some changes which, so far, have been beneficial, and to suggest how East Sussex AM might address what it believes to be its particular challenges.

I plan to speak for about forty minutes then deal with any questions you may have from what you've read, what you've heard or what other thoughts you may have brought to this study day. This afternoon I understand you will be in groups and will be looking at some specific issues which have already been signposted, but I'm hoping some of what I may say will inform or guide or be a potential solution to what those issues are. Your plenary session will hopefully bring out what are the underlying issues at East Sussex and what futures East Sussex might test.

**But first , Quaker Faith and Practice [5<sup>th</sup> ed.]****4.02**

*" ... The organisation of area meetings will vary, depending on their size. Each area meeting should decide how to manage local business to suit local needs and resources..."*

**4.03**

*"...Area meetings may wish to work with other meetings to carry out certain functions such as managing*

*property (see for example [5.09](#)). Not all area meetings will need to set up a complex committee structure. Meetings should bear in mind the importance of balancing the benefits of flexible patterns with the need to be accountable. Whatever business arrangements are adopted, it is helpful if they are regularly reviewed, to ensure that they are practical and workable ...”*

#### **4.04**

*“ ... Meetings may when appropriate appoint a member of another area meeting, but in such cases advance consultation between the meetings is advisable, and the decision must be communicated by minute ...”*

#### **4.06**

*“ ... Each area meeting shall meet at such frequency, times and places as the meeting itself may direct. ...”*

#### **4.09**

*“ ... The area meeting shall keep the following matters under regular review:*

*Then lists 20 responsibilities ... and “...This list will doubtless change over time.” Noting “ ... It is important that the area meeting give full and prayerful support to everyone who is appointed to serve it, whether on its own committees, or as a representative on another body, or in an individual capacity ...”.*

#### **4.12**

*“ ...Some area meetings may consider that they are too large or too small, have geographical constraints or have insufficient resources to form a supportive and effective community. Area meetings are encouraged in these circumstances to propose changes, which may result in a transfer of a local meeting from one area meeting to another, or amalgamation or division of area meetings. Any changes should stem from local needs. When area meetings are considering reorganisation it is recommended that they bear in mind the value of groupings which correspond to any relevant regional, ecumenical or other institutions ... “*

A clear message ... in the big red book ... that we have the liberty to find a framework, an arrangement, an infrastructure that suits our needs as individuals Quakers, as Local Meetings and as Area Meetings.

### **Concern About the Condition of Area Meetings**

Area Meetings have been on Meeting for Sufferings radar since 2011. Sufferings wished to communicate better with Area Meetings and to give greater support to Area Meetings, knowing that many Area Meetings were having difficulties in attracting Friends to their Meetings and the spirit was drowning in the business. Area Meetings reappeared on Sufferings radar again in 2015 as the primary theme of its residential gathering at Woodbrooke. Sufferings' first meeting in 2016 looked at Area Meetings through the multi-coloured prism of our new strategic plan “Our Faith in the Future” knowing that delivering on those beautifully expressed aspirations would rest, pretty much, with Area Meetings. Facing turbulent times, Quakers in Britain seek a future where ...

- Meeting for Worship is the bedrock of living as a Quaker.
- Quaker communities are loving, inclusive and all-age.
- All Friends understand and live by Quaker discipline.
- Quaker values are active in the world.
- Quakers work collaboratively
- Quakers are well known and widely understood

Are our current local, area and national infrastructures robust enough to deliver on those aspirations, are they fit for that purpose?

Quaker Life – through Representative Council - as well as training and Clerk Conferences at Woodbrooke – has, over several years, returned again and again to the condition of our Area Meetings. We learn that experiences are common, weaknesses are common and worries for the future are common. But we have a sense that potential or possible solutions are varied, sometimes innovative, and geared to making the Area Meeting a more effective engine for the fundamental and essential business but also in raising the joy of its members through spiritual growth, learning and community activity.

## **The Northumbria Area Meeting Story**

The so-called Northumbria model described in the paper is very much our practicing model at the moment. We review our changes each year and we hope we have the flexibility to tweak or amend any part of our arrangements should experience show that they are not working as well as we hoped, or if circumstances dictate that they need to change. In the early part of the report you have a description of probably an average Area Meeting. Regular Area Meetings, lots of routine but necessary business to deal with, the same small group of Friends attending regularly, the absence of children, difficulty in finding Friends to serve in key posts and not much communication between Meetings.

The prompt for change came from Alnwick Local Meeting and Meeting for Sufferings and their concerns prompted our whole Meeting to see how we might do better. A brief exploration of Quaker Faith and Practice told us that what business was the concern of an Area Meeting but did not prescribe how that business was dealt with. We felt this gave us a freedom to think how we might move forward. We consulted our Local Meetings over a six-month period. Local Meetings were pretty much in unison with the need for change.

From responses from those Local Meetings and some planning within the Clerk's Support Team we arrived at our new model Area Meeting. The first parts of the model seem obvious and elementary but they have been very effective. Area Meetings are held on much quieter Sundays – when Friends are used to going to Quaker Meetings and it enables Friends to join the hosting Meeting's regular Sunday worship. Lots of parking available!

Reducing the number of Area Meetings from eight to four and Local Meetings hosting Area Meeting every two years, not every year. We have eight Local Meetings so it was simple to pair off two Meetings giving us four partnerships. This would support the preparations for Area Meeting which it was felt should be the responsibility of the paired Local Meetings – this would, we hoped, bring the two Meetings closer together through collaborative work. A key offer from the host Local Meetings was providing overnight accommodation for Friends wishing to travel up the evening before and to join the Local Meeting's worship at its regular time. A number of Friends over the years since 2012 have taken up this opportunity to get closer to distant Friends.

As the paper says quite clearly, the single device which has made our Area Meeting a better place has been the creation of our Area Meeting Working Group. Meeting four times a year, in the month prior to full area Meeting, at a single central location and involving dedicated Friends representing their Local Meeting or other key Groups such as Trustees, Elders, Overseers, Standing Nominations Committee, Meeting for Sufferings representatives and our Economic Justice Group.

In practice, some twelve to twenty Friends have been attending Working Group. Our full Area Meetings in the past would attract from eighteen to twenty-six Friends. All Friends in the Area Meeting are welcome to attend. The atmosphere is different at Working Group, more relaxed, less discursive and, with good preparation by the Clerk, the routine business managed by the Working Group is dealt with effectively and quickly. At the heart of the Working Group is trust. That the business is appropriate, that attendance by representatives is regular, that the business is

discerned in the Light and matters conducted in good Gospel Order. That notices prior to the Working Group are circulated widely and that Minutes and copies of Reports are circulated equally widely as soon as possible after the Meeting. So far it seems to be working as intended. Recording the exchange of Minutes between Working Group and full Area Meeting is also important to ensure cross-referencing of items when the records are archived. Dividing the work between Working Group and full Area Meeting was, once again, achieved by consultation and negotiation. The outcomes were the Terms of Reference for the Working Group and the Table of Responsibilities. Both approved in full Area Meeting. Copies of which you should have.

So what of Area Meetings on Sundays? Now four times a year. As the paper tells you, the hosting partnership decides the shape and form of the day. It usually begins with Meeting for Worship but after that the partners have a free hand in creating an experience which will be spiritually uplifting and not mentally and physically dispiriting. I have several posters which illustrate some of the Area Meetings which I'll pass around, but the report gives more examples of what we have been doing.

And we leave time in the afternoon to deal with items of business which have been agreed as appropriate for Area Meeting. This timing has proved a tricky challenge. Initially held from 3.15pm with an aim to finish by 5.00pm, those timings have proven a bit difficult for some Friends after their spiritual exercises earlier in the day. Our next Area Meeting in March will run from 2.30pm with an aim to finish at 4.00pm.

We did intend Area Meeting to have a primary focus on membership stories including visitor reports, testimonies and memorials for departed Friends. Reports from Meeting for Sufferings are felt to be important and such reports are dealt with in Working Group and Area Meeting. But other business has been creeping in, so to speak, and we have a new resolve to stick firmly to our agreed Table of Responsibilities and ensure that Working Group and NOT Area Meeting has to deal with the routine items of Area Meeting business.

Attendance at Area Meeting has been quite staggering. From sixty to ninety in the early days – including many, many children - to an average now of some fifty to sixty Friends being at Area Meeting. We are finding that about forty remain for the business part of Area Meeting Sunday. I have sample posters of some of the events that have formed part of our spirit-led Area Meetings.

So there you have it. Nothing radical. We are not revolutionaries. We have looked at ourselves and our business and have found a simple infrastructure that allows us to deal with routine matters and to give time, space, and energy to enjoying spiritual activities which are diverse, sometimes unexpected and often great fun. We trust each other to be good Friends in whichever business or spirit led Meeting we find ourselves in. We believe our lines of communication haven been articulated clearly and are being held to by everyone. We encourage Friends who attend courses or conferences to draft reports which are received or heard by Working Group, sometimes forwarded to Area Meeting but always circulated widely to our Address Book. Trustees play their part in dealing with property, finance, policy making, confidential matters and dealings with the Charity Commission. And our Trustees are visible at our Area Meetings. We have two members of our Area Meeting as Britain Yearly Meeting Trustees.

## **The Future for Northumbria**

We have had several reviews of our new arrangements and the outcomes have been positive and we have been cleared to continue. I'm sure Northumbria will initiate a further review in light of "Our Faith in the Future" That very brief strategic plan sends out clear challenges to Friends and out organisations about our direction as a spirit-led body and as an agency which delivers services in a variety of communities at home and abroad. Northumbria met the challenge of the Yearly Meeting's previous Strategic Plan. I'm hoping we can come to terms with "Our Faith in the Future"

also and be sensitive that it may even lead to a new way of doing things. I'm struggling to find a weakness in our framework, but that can only be perceived in comparison with the faith and practice of other Area Meetings. I hope East Sussex Area Meeting will be able to find out what other Areas are up to and how they are dealing with the same matters that exercise East Sussex AM.

## **Some Afterthoughts**

Invite the Recording Clerk, Paul Parker, to speak to your Area Meeting. Paul has been out to many Local and Area Meetings to talk about his role and also the potential for change for Local and Area Meetings. His advocacy of reducing the business to a reasonable minimum and managing that business better is allied to his desire for Friends to experience something of the excitement about being a Quaker that early Friends enjoyed and which gave them courage to continue seeking, to live adventurously and to share the revolutionary message that is Quakerism. Paul is an inspiring speaker and his experience and knowledge of other Meetings is invaluable.

Measure or analyse what Friends in your Local and Area Meetings are contributing to our Society of Friends and its role and purpose and what a difference they make in their local communities. Northumbria used the template of Britain Yearly Meeting's strategic plan "Framework for Action 2009 -2014". The outcome was a surprising record of how much Friends and are Meetings are actually doing. It made us feel much better about ourselves as an Area Meeting.

Create a "sense" of your Area Meeting. Avoiding congregationalism is a concern for Friends around the country. Feeling that you, and your Local Meeting, are part of a bigger picture ... and Area Meeting, and indeed the Society of Friends, can be inspirational and confidence building. I think there is now a genuine "sense" of Northumbria Area Meeting. Encourage Friends to embark on journeys into service by offering their time, experience and expertise to the greater good of the Society of Friends.

Communication. Agendas, Minutes, Reports, Notices etc. are all shared widely across the Area Meeting using email and an extensive Mailing List. About a third of the Area Meeting are content to receive these mailings. Local Meeting Clerks ensure that their Meetings have news of courses, events and other opportunities. Notices of upcoming Meetings should be timely, perhaps in attractive - but simple - poster form which can be easily put up on a Local Meeting notice board. Minutes should be sent out quickly after Area Meeting – within a day or two. Consultations prior to Area Meetings by posing questions to Local business Meetings could ensure that Friends are informed when they arrive at Area Meeting and can reflect the sense of their own Meeting on the bigger issues dealt with at Area level.

Correspondence with Sussex East Friends say that you have challenges in simplifying and organising clerking, eldership and oversight and nominations. Our Area Meeting budget is currently set in the context of "Framework for Action 2009-2014 and includes a substantial budget - £7,000 in 2016 - to support attendance at Yearly Meeting and training for Quaker roles. Friends appointed by Area Meeting are strongly encouraged to attend an appropriate training event, usually at Woodbrooke, to enable them to fulfil their new roles with confidence and with a real sense of what the role might entail.

I understand Pickering and Hull Area Meeting are considering the potential benefits and disbenefits of employing a "manager" to organise their Area Meeting business whilst Friends energies focus on matters of the Spirit. Is there a role for Quaker pastors emerging? That is, Friends employed by the Meeting to look after its affairs, facilitating learning opportunities and perhaps leading spiritual development.

## A Way Forward for Sussex East Area Meeting?

You know your AM best. You know its strengths, its weaknesses. You may already have a sense of direction or future plan for the Area Meeting. You may be content that the AM is in the best shape it can be. But an exercise in Critical Analysis would be of signal benefit. It would sharpen the focus on who you are, what you want, where you want to be and how you might get there.

### Critical Analysis by Meeting for Sufferings Headings

At its residential gathering in December 2015 Meeting for Sufferings heard from Jocelyn Burnell, Assistant Clerk to Quaker Life Central Committee. Of 400 local meetings in Britain 75 have less than 10 members. 100 Meetings have less than 10 at Meeting for Worship on any given Sunday. Our membership is aging, with little new blood coming through. Friends may face the closure of local meetings and the sale of Meeting Houses. Jocelyn suggests our future focus may be on larger more sustainable local meetings, which may become, effectively, Area Meetings. 1,700 Friends are registered on Quaker Life Network, but more than 75% have not served on any national committee. Quaker Life is primed to offer support to local and area meetings.

Sufferings spent time at its December 2015 residential gathering looking at Area Meetings in the contexts of Problems and Challenges and Positive Experiences. East Sussex might use these criteria for testing its own health as an Area Meeting.

#### Problems and Challenges

- **Attendance** – Who comes to Local and Area Meetings? Who isn't coming? Is there a distinct demographic – all the old folks, all the same old folks? What are the blockages that prevent or inhibit Friends going to Meetings? What or who is blocking movements to change? Are Friends at Meeting to worship or to develop their activism in other fields?
- **Geography** – Local versus Area or region? Access to transport? Meetings in some localities thrive, others shrivel – why? Are our Area Meeting configurations appropriate for current geographies, demographics and access to transport?
- **Service** – Do we promote “Journeys into Service”? Are we training Friends in preparation for service? Who is able but not willing to serve – why not?
- **Business** – Is our Area Meeting really just about the business? Why is that? What business can we lay down? What business can be reassigned to Trustees or to a Working Group? Does business get in the way of building a spirit led community? Do we encourage Friends to know about our Society and how it works? Do Friends experience the Quaker business method held in gospel order? What business could be outsourced to professional consultancies?
- **Workload** – Why are our “essential” jobs seen to be difficult? Do we have too many jobs? Do we offer training for Quaker roles – if not, why not? What jobs can we lay down? Why is our focus on doing jobs and not nurturing the spirit?
- **Purpose** – Are we clear about the purpose of our Area Meeting? Can it be repurposed? What does that mean for Local Meetings?

#### Positive Experiences, and some ways forward

- **Purpose** - Develop a clear purpose, and sense of purpose. With clarity comes confidence, commitment and direction and a genuine sense of community. Define relationships with other Quaker bodies – especially Britain Yearly Meeting and Meeting for Sufferings.
- **Business** - Be assertive with Friends in compiling agendas for business Meetings. Should that item really be on Area Meeting agendas? Can stuff be dealt with in smaller groups, working groups, project groups or by delegated authority to individual Friends, or

outsourced to consultancies and other service? What would an East Sussex Table of Responsibilities look like? What can we economically buy in? Is there a natural and nearby partner for joint activities? Teamwork!

- **Communication** – Be regular, timely, informative. Agendas out well in advance. Are our Clerks trained and confident in their roles. If not, why not? Minutes out as soon as possible afterwards. Share consultation documents. There may be confidentiality but there should not be secrets. Prepare for Meetings, drafting in advance. What's in a name – should we become "Gatherings" rather than "Areas". Can we use Skype? Why not?
- **Nurturing the Spirit** – More gatherings as social affairs. The Ministry of Hospitality-bringing Friends together to share food, to work together, to learn together. See each other faces! Away-days or weekends. Encourage everyone to go to Area Meeting. What topics are currently energising or suppressing your Area Meeting gatherings? Recognise and use the skills and experience of Friends. Don't be afraid to be a leader – at a Local or Area Meeting, or as an individual Friend.

### **Possible Best Next Steps?**

Set up a small group of Friends who can carry out a meaningful critical analysis of East Sussex – its past, present and futures. Report to Area Meeting until work is complete. You already have your De-Cluttering Team.

Consult widely – with each other, with nearby Local Meetings, with Quaker Life at Friends House, with neighbouring Area Meetings, with Area Meetings quite like East Sussex in terms of geographies and size. Refer to "Our Faith in the Future". How's does that colour what you could or should be doing in East Sussex.

Imagine potential and possible futures and prepare one, two or three models for East Sussex Area Meeting. Don't just say this is what we have found out – say how you think you could go forward. Consult Local Meetings and individual Friends. Refer to Quaker Life at Friends House.

Be experimental and experiential. Trial your preferred model. Can it be trimmed or expanded? Does it actually work. Should we move on to an alternative. Take risks. Be confident in changing direction if it doesn't work. Change takes time in Quaker circles.

### **Conclusions**

Friends at East Sussex Area Meeting, the future is with you.

Be honest and plain speaking about your condition. If it's good, then celebrate and share your joy. If its rusting away and needs a re-spray or polish, find the best treatment which will do what it says on the tin.

Friends, we are a shrinking Society. Down to 13,000 members. How can we possibly cope with 400 local meetings and more than 71 Area Meetings? Do the maths.

Is our Society really fit enough to survive for the rest of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, never mind hoping that it will be here for another 360 years?

We have a precious legacy from early Friends, and from Friends down the centuries. It's being squandered as we nurture our business but not our spirit.

We are fading away because seekers outside the Society do not see our bright shining Light, our special worship, our reliance on God to lead us without the armour plate of priesthood, liturgy and church buildings

Our spirit is weakening., Our business is killing us.

We need to be leaner and fit for purpose in what we do as business. We need creative solutions to our plight as a society.

Do we need Area Meetings? Do we need Local Meetings? Can we not pare back our business so that it can be delivered from a single, central administration – even just from Friends House?

How can we improve our spiritual offer? What does that mean?

Should we be seeking new Friends and convincements? How would we do that. Do we have a leader within us?

Get it right and our Friend Gillian Grant suggests ... in the Friend of 5<sup>th</sup> February, 2016 ... we can look to 90,000 members. But she warns us ...

*No organisation will be attractive or even successful in remaining in existence if it holds to administrative and governance structures that do not meet members' needs, and indeed appears to berate those who cannot or do not wish to participate in those structures. No amount of education about the role of AM will increase attendance and participation from those who do not find it satisfying or practically possible to attend.*

I've been thinking of late that perhaps what we need to do is do away with Local Meetings!

That is, the administrative stuff that local meetings have problems dealing with could be managed by a single unit in the area. So one Treasurer, one Clerk etc. That would release Friends in Local Meetings to become smaller, but much better worshipping communities. I envisage for Northumbria - just by way of example - Newcastle being the centre and source of administration and key skills, and other local meetings being satellites served by the better resourced centre. We become, simply, Northumbria Quakers ... having dropped "Area Meeting" and "Local Meeting".

I believe the old message ... which went out with the Valiant Sixty ... is the best message.

We trouble ourselves by our failure failing to attract families, children and young people.

But our Society is a mature church, a genuine Society of Friends. It is, dare I say, an intellectual society. Friends are convinced not converted. They arrive after spiritual journeys which can take decades or be in a sudden flash of understanding.

There are many Single Quakers in families - SQIFs .

We need to speak to adults ... in an adult way ... on their spiritual journeys ... who do not know of Friends and our peculiar practices. But may yet hunger for a faith that enables a direct connection with God and the eternal.

Early Friends had the courage to challenge the religious orthodoxies of their day and carve out a new future which was founded on truth, equality, simplicity and a peaceable kingdom.

Today's Friends face additional challenges of seeking to grow spiritually as a Meeting, dealing

with business appropriately and looking outward to share our still revolutionary and startling message – a direct relationship with our God, with each other and with our local communities.

To refer once again to The Friend of 5<sup>th</sup> February 2016 and our good Friend Gillian Grant ...

***Let's think outside the box about Area Meetings now***

To finish, I'm reminded of the epistle to the brethren in the North issued by a Meeting of Elders at Balby in 1656 ...

*Dearlly beloved Friends, these things we do not lay upon you as a rule or form to walk by, but that all, with the measure of light which is pure and holy, may be guided; and so in the light walking and abiding, these may be fulfilled in the Spirit, not from the letter, for the letter killeth, but the Spirit giveth life.*

Postscript to an epistle to 'the brethren in the north'  
issued by a meeting of elders at Balby, 1656

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