

NONTHEIST FRIENDS NETWORK

NEWS UPDATE, FEBRUARY/MARCH 2014

Hardly a Newsletter-proper, this time, but an eleventh hour warning that you'll miss out on our forthcoming Woodbrooke conference if you don't get your application in [within the next few days!](#) Plus info on how you can catch up on the QCCIR conference on nontheism by reading the reports and listening to the speakers and the group discussion [right here on your computer!](#)

The Network's annual conference is at Woodbrooke from March 21-23. Theme: *Nontheism in Quakerism and Beyond*. Our guest presenters are Paul Parker, Recording Clerk of Britain Yearly Meeting, and Helen Rowlands, Woodbrooke's Head of Education. Full details, including rates for both residential and one-day or one-session bookings are on our website, www.nontheist-quakers.org.uk

The January 25th conference organised by the Quaker Committee for Christian and Interfaith Relations at Friends House, London, on religious faith and nontheism brought together nearly a hundred representatives of Area Meetings from all over the country. It was the first national conference on nontheism among Friends to be organised by Friends House, and was hugely oversubscribed. You can read full reports and [listen to the speakers at your leisure](#) by going to www.quaker.org.uk, finding "Quaker Committee for Christian and Interfaith Relations Day Conference" and clicking on any of several links, including Michael Wright's report and audio files of the three keynote addresses (David Boulton, Philip Gross and Rex Ambler) and the general discussion that followed. Michael Wright's report was also published across two pages in *The Friend* on February 14.

Over the past year we have made big strides in getting nontheist understandings of the Quaker way on to the national agenda, in *The Friend*, in Area and Local Meetings, and in groups like QCCIR. The QCCIR initiative will be continued at BYM Gathering and YM at Bath in August, where NFN will also have a presence. Later in the autumn the Network will partner the Progressive Christianity Network (PCN) in organising a major British tour by the radical and inspirational 'post-theist' president of the Canadian branch of PCN, Gretta Vosper, with meetings in major cities including Newcastle, Manchester and Oxford.

Things are changing! Be part of the change! See you at Woodbrooke for starters!

In Friendship

David Boulton

NFN convenor

NONTHEIST FRIENDS NETWORK



NEWS

April 2014

DO LOOK AT OUR WEBSITE - <http://www.nontheist-quakers.org.uk>

Friends

Welcome back to our *NEWS*.

Hello - I am the new Clerk of the Network – Michael Wright, from Middlesbrough Local Meeting. I was appointed in March, when it was decided the Network will now have a Clerk instead of a Convenor. Editing the regular *NEWS* goes with the role.

David Boulton was Convenor from the time the Network started 3 years ago, and was very much its initiator. We paid tribute and thanks to him at our annual conference at Woodbrooke for the great contribution he has made to establishing the Network as an accepted part of the Quaker scene in Britain. We are one of the Listed Informal Groups of Britain Yearly Meeting. Thanks to David we also have links with Nontheist networks in America, Canada, New Zealand and Australia.

David's "thank you" message is below.

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Dear Friends

I was very moved by the lovely send-off you gave me at our Woodbrooke conference. The delightful card, signed by you all, and the exceedingly generous voucher for garden plants which Anthea in particular greatly appreciates! As I said at the time, it felt as if I were at my own memorial service – but I must warn you that I am still around and hope to play some part as a member-without-portfolio of our Steering Group, among whom I have found such wonderful companions, comrades and friends over the past three years.

When Tony Benn left Parliament he said it was to give him more time for politics. Now that I have handed on the convenor/clerk's role I hope it will give me more time to talk and write about nontheism among Friends and beyond.

In continuing Friendship **David Boulton**

MEMBERSHIP – renewal of subscriptions – help us grow!

Membership Secretary – Miriam Branson, 6 James Street, Kinver, West Midlands. DY7 7FD miriam.branson@waitrose.com Miriam will be very glad to receive your membership subscription for the year if you have not yet paid it for this coming 12 months (which always starts at the AGM in March). It is £20, payable to NFN.

Thank you

Nontheism among Quakers and beyond

Nontheist Friends Network invited four speakers to our annual conference in March 2014 to help us focus on issues within and beyond the Society of Friends in Britain.

Brian Mountford

Brian is the author of *Christian Atheism* and vicar of St.Mary's, Oxford - the university church. For his book he interviewed a number of people who remain loyal to their church although they have taken leave of God.

He found that what keeps them as regular attenders at church services are their attachments to their religious community, to the moral compass that gives them, and to the aesthetics of the spiritual life – prayer, music, art and architecture. He talked of the tension between pre-modern and post-modern views of religion.

He said many people find their way into membership of a religious community through participation in social, musical or practical action. This in turn leads to a deeper commitment.

He spoke of the benefit of honest doubt. Doubts are important as they can lead to people trying out different ways of being, praying, living, and believing. These can lead on to experiments, different experiences, insights, and commitments. They can lead to a greater clarity in understanding and articulating what that person feels able to commit themselves to.

He saw the need for a core commitment, which holds the community together. This, for the mainline churches has been a common statement of belief. He wondered - what is the common core for Quakers? Some said our common core is the practice of Meeting for Worship and the way we conduct our Meetings for Worship for Business. Others wanted to include our shared testimonies. Another suggestion was that the Advices and Queries provides that common core.

Paul Parker and Helen Rowlands

The Network invited Paul Parker, Recording Clerk, and Helen Rowlands, Head of Education at Woodbrooke to speak to us of the Whoosh! Epistle which was read during a period of silent worship at the start of their session. They explained how that came to be drafted, from a Quaker Life threshing conference of Friends in 2012 whose conviction was “that our experience-based religion is increasingly what many people are looking for. Growing numbers of people have rejected all claims to absolute truth, but are hungry for a path of personal and social transformation.”

Their theme was how can diversity and disagreement be handled well, in the Society of Friends? The Whoosh! Epistle includes the challenges: “Can we acquire the confidence to find our own words to express the ways in which we understand the divine?” and “Can we encourage others as they reach for the language that is right for them?”

A development from that 2012 conference is the “Vibrancy in Meetings Initiative” which is naturally leading into the review of our book of discipline: Quaker Faith and Practice (QF&P). They were clear that it is important that there should be a period of patient exploration over the next couple of years as we Friends learn from each other, and explore many topics in honest open conversations, in conferences and local meetings. They discern that the Society is not yet ready to begin revising QF&P without this exploration and discernment. They felt it important that we begin by sharing ways of describing and expressing what unites us, while at the same time exploring the richness of our diversity.

Being Friends Together

Britain Yearly Gathering at Bath in August 2014, will be told of a further initiative by Quaker Life. Its theme is “Being Friends Together”. We are all invited to embark on a nationwide programme of learning, encouraging each local meeting to become a learning community. All Friends are encouraged to play a full part in these Quaker conversations, and develop contacts beyond our own Society of Friends with people with whom we can work even if they do not share our views.

In the discussion which followed, David Boulton reminded the conference that the Steering Group had agreed the text of a public statement, printed in *The Friend* earlier this year, that the Network is not seeking to impose nontheist language in any revision of QF&P. It stated that the words of George Fox and others “are a precious part of our common Quaker heritage. What we hope a revision might accomplish is what every previous revision has accomplished, namely that any new edition speaks afresh to a new generation, reflecting the dynamics of change to which our Society, like every other group, is inevitably subject.

“Over the last thirty years the Religious Society of Friends has become more theologically diverse, more accepting of views that challenge traditional understandings of ‘God’ and ‘Spirit’ as transcendental realities. We simply hope that any revision of our inspirational writings will reflect this greater diversity, without in any way devaluing tried and tested Quaker language.”

Paul Parker said he had noted the Network’s links with other ecumenical and international groups, which could be of value in this process. In introducing Paul and Helen, Michael Wright had referred to the links members of the Network have with the Progressive Christianity Network – with whom we have been co-operating in a planned national speaking tour in September (to Newcastle, Manchester, London and Oxford – though that is currently being renegotiated, and may be a residential conference in Derbyshire together with a speaking engagement in London) of Greta Vosper, a minister in the United Church of Canada and author of “With or Without God”; with Sea of Faith, Modern Church, and Breathing Space. He also drew attention to international links with nontheists in Canada, USA, New Zealand and Australia.

DO LOOK AT OUR WEBSITE - <http://www.nontheist-quakers.org.uk>

and – if you are a paid-up member – join our on-line discussion group

Network's aim

At the Network's Annual General Meeting that weekend, a new description of the Network's aim was agreed – **“to provide a forum and supportive framework for Friends who regard religion as a human creation. We seek to explore theological and spiritual diversity, and their practical implications, in respectful acceptance of different views, experiences and journeys.”**

Michael Wright was appointed Clerk of the Network for three years in place of David Boulton who has been the Convenor since the Network was founded. Tributes were paid to David for the considerable work he has done to establish the Network as a Listed Informal Group, with ecumenical and international links, as well as engaging in conversations with other Friends who have different views and experiences.

Other members appointed to the Steering Group were: Trevor Bending, Frank Bonner, David Boulton, Miriam Branson, Audrey Regan, Sarah Richards, Maureen Tinsley, and Michael Yates.

David Boulton

David was the final speaker at the conference. He set the Network in the context of theological exploration and biblical criticism over the past 200 years, beginning with Deism and Unitarianism, followed by the works of German Lutheran pastors such as David Strauss *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, and Ludwig Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity*, both translated into good English by Mary Ann Evans – George Eliot.

He charted the development of ideas about God through John Robinson's *Honest to God* and Don Cupitt's *Taking Leave of God*, and *Sea of Faith*, and could have mentioned his own *The Trouble with God*. He praised the work of the New Zealand Presbyterian theologian, Lloyd Geering – particularly his *Christianity without God*. He spoke also of the Jesus Seminar in America and the more recent rise of Progressive Christianity on the east coast of America.

He told us of his own links with people in America, Canada, New Zealand and Australia, as well as with ecumenical groups in Britain such as Progressive Christianity Network, Sea of Faith, and Breathing Space. In interfaith work he spoke too of the books of Stephen Bachelor: *Buddhism without beliefs*, and *Confessions of a Buddhist atheist*.

Furthermore he spoke of the secular humanist movement, some of which can be sterile and fundamentalist, but not all are like that. The Sunday Assemblies which have sprung up in many cities are groups we might constructively engage with. David encouraged us: “Don't just think in Quaker terms but reach out to connect with others.”

Finally he raised the question: “Where is religion going next?” and recommended a new book from an American Quaker nontheist, Os Cresson *Quaker and Naturalist TOO*. see David's introduction to his book on page 7 of this *NEWS*. (NB – In American, “naturalist” means one who regards religious experiences as natural; in British English it is used to mean one interested in nature.)

Going forward – at Britain Yearly Gathering in Bath

Friends present at the weekend certainly felt the energy to engage in the numerous Quaker conversations that are likely to take place over the coming years as local meetings seek to become Meetings for Learning. The exploration of experiences, and ways of describing our experiences, will eventually filter in to the review of Quaker Faith and Practice.

(These will be very important from August onwards. Our “yellow form” on the next page is our preparation for providing names of people willing to participate in these conversations, and explorations, to explain their point of view. We are hoping many people we are in contact with will use the form as a template to respond to me – Michael Wright. It would be a great help if you can do so by the end of June. Thank you.)

The Quaker Committee for Christian and Interfaith Relations (QCCIR) organised a day conference at Friends House in January entitled: “Faith – what has God got to do with it?” They are following this up with a series of four encounters at Britain Yearly Gathering at Bath in August to which they have invited three members of our Network to participate. The three who have responded to this invitation are Bonnie Grotjahn, Sarah Richards and Michael Wright.

Our Network have also requested two occasions at Bath for an Open Forum for people to come and find out about Nontheist Friends Network, and there will be a table-top display of information about us on two evenings Tuesday and Wednesday during that week.

The new Steering Group now seeks to engage Friends of different persuasions in conversations of mutual respect and inter-change, learning from others, ready to share our experiences and insights. We are open to responding to invitations to provide a speaker at study days, conferences, and other exchanges.

At the discussion on our aim at the AGM, members asked that we should address issues of sustainability, exploring the numinous, and the practical application of our approach to the Quaker way in social engagement alongside people with views very different to our own. This is the way forward we shall seek to address in the coming months.

Michael Wright

DO LOOK AT OUR WEBSITE - <http://www.nontheist-quakers.org.uk>

and – if you are a paid-up member – join our on-line discussion group

it is well worth looking at these American Nontheist Friends websites

nontheist-friends@googlegroups.com and the website www.nontheistfriends.org

NONTHEIST FRIENDS NETWORK

Our “yellow form”

The Network Steering Group would welcome information from you to know what talents, skills, experiences and views you have which can help promote the aim of the Network. If you care to provide this information to the Clerk it will enable us to consult you individually on certain matters, including opportunities to help others understand our aim, and for us to work with or alongside others on different journeys.

The Network’s aim is to provide a forum and supportive framework for Friends who regard religion as a human creation. We seek to explore theological and spiritual diversity, and their practical implications, in respectful acceptance of different views, experiences, and journeys.

Please use this template – you can copy and paste it into an email – and send me as many of these details as you are happy to provide us with. Very many thanks.
Michael Wright - michaelwright80@virginmedia.com

Name

Address

Phone number/s

Email

Local Meeting

Please share some of your experiences and interests as

A Quaker – fulfilling Quaker responsibilities

Working with people whose views are different from yours

Areas of particular interest and concern

Are you willing to consider responding to invitations to act in the following ways?

Public speaking

Facilitating groups

Planning learning events

Writing/editing/proof reading

Researching

Creative arts

Environmental and sustainability issues

Exploring spiritual diversity – including secular spirituality

Other

Book Review – by David Boulton

Quaker and Naturalist Too

By Os Cresson

For more than twenty years Os Cresson has been a leading light among nontheist Friends, his quiet, unassuming influence extending to Friends' communities in the United States, Britain and beyond. Os is a 100% Quaker, – and a one-hundred-percent naturalist without a trace of supernaturalism or mystical transcendentalism in his make-up. Not half-Quaker and half-atheist, not in two minds, nor standing with feet planted in two opposing camps, but “a person whose philosophies of science and religion and everything else, are bound to what we observe and what we infer from that”.

Clear as he is about his own position (he quotes the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition of naturalism: “A view of the world, and of man’s relation to it, in which only the operation of natural [as opposed to supernatural or spiritual] laws and forces is admitted or assumed”) he is equally clear that this is only one position among many to be found in the modern, liberal, creedless Society of Friends. Os delights in this diversity and would have it no other way. Dogmatism is religion’s most relentless enemy within, and readers will find no trace of it in this book.

Os has never thrust himself into the limelight. He has written for Friends Journal and contributed two classic essays to *Godless for God’s Sake*, the book which might be said to have given nontheist Quakerism lift-off when it was published in 2006. But many of his most valuable and insightful contributions have appeared in the transient medium of the internet, on the email forum nontheist-friends@googlegroups.com and the website www.nontheistfriends.org One reason for welcoming this book is that it snatches some of these gems from cyberspace and gives them new life on the printed page.

The result is not only a powerful personal exposition of religious commitment free of outdated supernaturalism but also something of a handbook for nontheist Friends of all descriptions – naturalist, humanist, atheist, devout skeptic – and an eye-opener for Friends who have found it hard to reconcile godlessness with traditional Quaker metaphysics. Os starts with a short section on Quaker Unity, but I would recommend coming back to that after first taking in a truly wonderful essay, *Quakers from the Viewpoint of a Naturalist*, which opens his second section. **This is probably the best short statement of what it means to be a nontheist Friend that I have read anywhere.**

In a third section, Os digs deep into Quaker history to reveal a developing strand of Quaker dissent, or open-mindedness, which he characterises as the roots which eventually flowered into Quaker nontheism. Here he builds on one of his *Godless for God’s Sake* essays, starting with Gerrard Winstanley and Jacob Bauthumley in the 17th century, moving on to 18th century “Quaker Sceptics” like John Bartram, the

“proto-Hicksites” Job Scott, Abraham Shackleton, Hannah Barnard and Mary Newhall, and the Free Quakers of Philadelphia.

In the 19th century he rediscovers David Duncan and the Manchester Free Friends, the Progressive and Congregational Friends of Longwood and New York, and the redoubtable Lucretia Mott (“I confess to great scepticism as to any account or story which conflicts with the unvarying natural laws of God and his creation”). Among several 20th century radicals he includes Henry Joel Cadbury, historian, Biblical scholar, social activist (“I can describe myself as no ardent theist or atheist... My own religion is mainly neither emotional nor rational but expresses itself habitually, or occasionally in action”).

This section concludes with an essay on Religious Naturalism in the Time of Fox. Os does not claim these giants for fully-developed naturalism or humanism, but offers them as examples of a free-thinking movement at the heart of the Quaker tradition which paved the way to an inclusive Quakerism where today’s nontheist Friends can find themselves at home. Here he has made a most valuable contribution to Quaker historiography, the more so since each entry is backed by source notes including an extensive bibliography.

No less valuable is the list of more than fifty recent books, pamphlets, articles and essays by Quaker nontheists which brings the book to a close.

This combination of exposition and resource manual makes *Quaker and Naturalist* a must-read both for Friends already committed to a nontheist viewpoint and others willing to explore adventurously what it might mean to be both religious and godless, Quaker and atheist. I cannot recommend it too highly.

David Boulton

Quaker and Naturalist Too – by Os Cresson, 2014 published by Morning Walk Press, Iowa City, Iowa, USA. ISBN 978-0-9914344-0-4 available from Quaker Bookshop £12.00

Have you looked at our website yet? Do have a look

- <http://www.nontheist-quakers.org.uk>

and – have you paid for this year’s membership?

and joined our on-line discussion group?

MORE NEWS WILL BE COMING SOON ABOUT COMING EVENTS

Gretta Vosper

Gretta Vosper describes herself <http://www.grettavosper.ca> as “Minister, Author, Atheist”. She is a Minister of the United Church of Canada, and founder and Chair of the Canadian Centre for Progressive Christianity. Her two books are:

“**With or Without God** – why the way we live is more important than what we believe”

“**Amen** – what prayer can mean in a world beyond belief”

What she says the world needs is: “***the radical simplicity that lies at the core of Christianity and many other faiths – an abiding trust in the way of love expressed in just and compassionate living.***”

This core message carries its own authority. It needs no doctrine to validate it, no external expert or supernatural authority to tell us it is right.”

The intellectual challenge: what is irrelevant, refutable, or simply wrong we have to consign to the historical record. Those things that are worthy of being carried into the future will become the core of the church’s teaching and strength.

The practical challenge: to create and strengthen communities, ethical exploration and challenge, corporate and personal spiritual nurture, advocating justice, compassionate efforts to help and heal others, freedom with integrity, and conversations that have the potential to transform our ideas and behaviour.

The spiritual challenge: we must lay down the false sense of rescue in prayer, and take responsibility for what we formerly put on God. This offers a radically new understanding of prayer – a liberating, challenging, empowering one.

Transforming communities - by these means, Christian communities can be transforming communities, without need of dogma or doctrine. We need to dream again, recognising that our visions, ideas, choices, and challenges all come from within us, not from somewhere else. We have the challenge to create a future for this planet in which love, made incarnate through justice and compassion, is the supreme value.

Offering this workshop elsewhere – I recently gave a workshop in Newcastle, explaining her basic ideas. I am happy to offer this workshop elsewhere. The presentation requires two separate hours. In addition it requires comfort breaks and opportunities for people to gather in groups and discuss the ideas; so essentially it requires a day approximately 10 – 4. It was well received. At least one group in Newcastle are following this up with a series of group discussions. If you want to plan such an event – contact me and we will see what can be arranged.

Michael Wright: Clerk of the Nontheist Friends Network

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NONTHEIST FRIENDS NETWORK



NEWS

June 2014

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Membership renewals see this page

Preparing for Yearly Meeting at Bath:

- **PLEASE LET ME KNOW IF YOU WILL BE AT YEARLY GATHERING at BATH**
- Details of NFN events & discussions there
- Encouragement to engage in conversations with other Friends beforehand

Invitation to you to write about your Quaker views and experiences

Advertising Gretta Vosper's speaking events in London & Oxford in September

A couple of books:

- David Boulton's *Objection Overruled*;
- review by me of *The Quest for a Moral Compass* by Kenan Malik

DO LOOK AT OUR WEBSITE - <http://www.nontheist-quakers.org.uk>

MEMBERSHIP – renewal of subscriptions – help us grow!

Membership Secretary – Miriam Branson, 6 James Street, Kinver, West Midlands. DY7 6ED miriam.branson@waitrose.com 01384 877789. Miriam will be very glad to receive your membership subscription for the year if you have not yet paid it for this coming 12 months (which always starts at the AGM in March). It is £20, payable to NFN. If you are not sure whether you have paid or not, Miriam will be able to tell you. Thank you

We are not able to afford to continue to post copies of this Newsletter (to people who do not have email) to people who do not pay their annual subscription. If you wish to continue to receive this Newsletter, but have not yet renewed your annual subscription, you will find that this will be the last edition posted to you until your subscription is renewed.

Treasurer – Sarah Richards has succeeded Maureen Tinsley as our Treasurer. Her address is: 8 Ashleigh Grove, Forest Hall, Newcastle upon Tyne NE12 8EY - but please send membership subscriptions to the Membership Secretary Miriam Branson, not to Sarah.

Yearly Meeting Gathering

*** Please let me know if you are going to be at YMG ***

I will be grateful for support and help at the Special Interest Group events on Sunday 12.15 – 2.15 and on Wednesday 7.30 – 9.p.m.

Clerk - Michael Wright: michaelwright80@virginmedia.com 01642 851919

at Bath contact me on: 07966 527697

Events to note

QCCIR conversations - Faith – what has God got to do with it?

There will be three “Journeys” events at which Network speakers have been invited to converse with a theist Friend. These are organised by the Quaker Committee for Christian and Interfaith Relations (QCCIR). They continue the discussions started last January when QCCIR invited David Boulton, Philip Gross, and Rex Ambler to speak to this theme.

These three events will take place in the Chancellor’s Building on Monday, August 4 3.45-4.45, and the other two on Tuesday, August 5 – the first at 2.15 -3.15 and then a different discussion at 3.45 – 4.45.

It will be good if there are members of the Network present to participate in the general discussions initiated by these events. *See further in this Newsletter how QCCIR have chosen to structure these sessions.*

Prayer beyond belief - Tuesday August 5 – 3.45-4.45 p.m. in Chancellor’s Building 4TH Floor, Room 8. The description of this event in the programme reads:

‘This session explores ways of prayer, including thankfulness, wonder, concerns, and self-examination that are spiritual exercises that are not directed at God. Michael Wright has returned to some of the disciplines of prayer with a new freedom of spirit, and refreshment. Previously accustomed to Anglican forms of prayer, and finding himself “bereaved of God”, he has rediscovered for himself a nontheist spirituality which he finds life enhancing.’

SPECIAL INTEREST GROUP EVENT – NONTHEIST FRIENDS NETWORK – all the ***Special Interest Group events take place between 12.15 and 2.15 p.m.***

Ours will be on Sunday August 3rd

SPECIAL INTEREST GROUP FAIR – **Wednesday evening 7.30 – 9.p.m.** A table top display, and people to explain/discuss nontheism and our network.

Being a Quaker today

At Yearly Meeting Gathering at Bath in August, the focus is on commitment and belonging, including an exploration of what membership means for Friends.

So we are each to be faced on the first day of the Gathering with the question

“What does it mean to be a Quaker today?” I think it could be very fruitful if we each reflect on and respond to that question in the next two months.

We are encouraged to do so in our local meetings. We can also do so with just one or two Friends whom we find it helpful to consult with. I wonder if some of us might find it constructive to write our personal responses to that question, and share them with others in our Network?

Our Friends in the Nontheist Network in America are planning with us a new book – a successor to *Godless for God’s Sake*. I am in consultation with them, and they are seeking both short pieces, and longer pieces, that reflect responses to that very question. As they need their material by the end of November this year, **I am inviting British NFN Friends to start talking and/or writing to see what we can produce.** – see the item below headed **PROPOSED MATERIAL...**

Theist and Nontheist Friends

The Religious Society of Friends in Britain is going through many changes at present, including facing the prospect of revising our book of discipline: *Quaker Faith and Practice*. The nontheist perspective has grown so rapidly in the Society in recent years, that some Friends have expressed their fears that in this revision there will be attempts to write the theist perspective out of our documents.

The Nontheist Friends Network has no wish for that to happen. We fully appreciate that the theist perspective has been an integral part of the Quaker way since our foundation, and remains a crucial basis of belief and action for many Friends. Indeed many Friends are reluctant to put into words their concept of God, the Light, the Spirit, or the Divine. A number of Friends say they are reluctant to identify as either theist or nontheist, often supporting this “non-both” position with the argument that whether God “exists” or not is beside the point, the real point being what do we mean when we use the word God and God-language.

We hope that in any revision, due provision will be made for those of us who do not share the theist conviction, alongside those who do, and those who opt to use neither language.

Our principal concern is to provide a network for exploring ideas and ways of expressing ourselves according to our experiences. That has always been a strong Quaker tradition. We also wish to provide support and encouragement to any nontheist Friends in meetings where they feel unable to be honest about their own experiences and views. Equally we want any theist Friends to feel entirely

comfortable in expressing their views and experiences. It is not good Quaker practice for people to be made to feel unable to be honest and clear in speaking plainly by others using body-language behaviour, or challenging words, to inhibit them from being true to their convictions and experiences.

This is indeed a testing time for Friends, in which we explore how such different perspectives can hold together in the Quaker tradition. Friends with either perspective often find it difficult to encapsulate in words their understanding of their experiences and convictions. We hope that sharing together in meetings for worship, and meetings for worship for business, in Quaker work, in fellowship and in recreation, in learning and exploring together, we will find ways of moving forward that are mutually enriching. Finding words that express well what we want to say, will help many to be confident in talking with others.

This is what QCCIR is inviting us to participate in, and I hope many of us will respond positively. So if you are thinking of responding to this request to write about what it means to you to be a Quaker today, I hope you will seek to address this balance of respect. It will be helpful if we have clarity from a nontheist perspective, in a way that will pay due respect to our theist Friends. *Michael Wright: Clerk of NFN*

A nontheist approach in a nutshell

Our Advices and Queries are a much-treasured resource for Friends. I wonder if some of us, either individually or as a group activity, might like to explore drafting some short paragraphs that are meaningful to us from our personal perspectives on one or more of the themes in Advices & Queries. The themes below are as described in the *Becoming Friends* course material, for those wanting to learn more of Quaker ways:

- 1 – 7 The inner life
 - 8-13 Meeting for worship
 - 14-16 Meeting for worship for business
 - 17-20 Moving from worship to community
 - 21-30 Living as a Quaker
 - 31-42 Testimonies and faith in action
-

Preparing for Yearly Meeting Gathering

In preparation for YMG, Friends are invited to consider the following questions:

- How does your being a member or not a member affect your feeling of commitment and belonging to your Quaker meeting and to the broader Quaker community?
- If you are in membership, did something change for you, and in you, when you became a member? Did you feel different, more responsible, perhaps even transformed?
- What is the continuing spiritual effect of membership?

It seems to me we could each make a constructive contribution to this exploration by writing some longer pieces in response to these questions.

I aim to produce another Newsletter in the middle of July – and will be happy to include in it responses to these invitations and questions from whoever wishes to send me contributions.

Long Term Framework

Friends are invited to participate in the consultation to draft a new Long Term Framework for 2015-2020 for Britain Yearly Meeting. There is a full page article about this in *The Friend*, June 13, page 4.

The Working Group, set up by Meeting for Sufferings stressed that the consultation process should involve all Quakers in Britain. The report quotes Julia Gordon, Clerk of the Working Group that they want it to be 'flexible, buoyant and dynamic'. She urged Friends throughout Britain to take part in the consultation process. Its aim is to create a 'clear, shared vision of the future'. She stressed the word 'clarity' in articulating 'our varied leadings' and also the value of feedback.

The key questions we are asked to consider are:

- What do Quakers hold in common?
- What principles and processes make our work 'Quaker' to us and to others?
- What national structures would enable your Meeting to flourish?
- What is your five-year vision for your Local Meeting, for Quakers in Britain and for the world?

These surely are questions we in the Nontheist Friends Network need to respond to. HOW?

- We can share ideas on our website blog – which is open to all members who have paid their annual subscription for this year.
- We can form an email discussion group to have a go at drafting some responses to these questions.

- I can ask all of our @200 contacts if they will agree to share their contact details so that people who live near each other could seek to meet and discuss these questions, and frame their responses.

PLEASE EMAIL ME, OR WRITE ME A LETTER, AND LET ME KNOW WHAT YOU THINK SO THAT WE CAN MAKE A CONSTRUCTIVE RESPONSE FROM OUR MEMBERSHIP TO THIS INVITATION.

Contributions need to be with the Framework Working Group by January 2015.

Review of listed informal groups

I see in *The Friend* of June 13, that Meeting for Sufferings agreed to recommend setting up a short term review group to consider the status of informal groups within Quakers in Britain.

There are a wide range of different listed informal groups, and a variety of ways in which they are structured and governed. This apparently has created confusion and concerns.

Nontheist Friends Network is such an informal listed group.

In the report in *The Friend* it was recommended that there should be more clarity in the way listed informal groups are recognised, to improve communication with different Quaker bodies amongst other things. The report states: 'It was felt that a review group could help by clarifying and strengthening the links between independent Quaker bodies, Quaker Meetings and Yearly Meeting.

Terms of reference for this review group will be brought to the next Meeting for Sufferings.

The QCCIR conversations

Quaker Committee on Christian and Interfaith Relations have planned the conversations at Bath in the following structure:

Faith, what's God got to do with it?

Explanation of Journey

The Quaker Committee on Christian and Interfaith Relations has invited the Friends Nontheist Network to help us deepen our corporate spiritual experience by finding ways to express the inexpressible, by responding to descriptions of the nature of the divine using philosopher's Ken Wilber's model of the 1-2-3 of God, as applied to Friends by Felicity Kall (*Friends Quarterly. Volume 2. 2010*). Her essay was one of

three winning essays in the Friends Quarterly essay competition in 2009 on The future of the Religious Society of Friends in Britain.

Session 1: The 1st person God, immanent

The first three sessions will open with brief presentations, followed by time for discussion. We begin on firm ground: the God within, 'that of God', is the understanding of God with which Friends are most comfortable.

Session 2: The 2nd person God, transcendent

Understanding God 'out there', the power which created and sustains the world, is more problematic. In this session we shall think about issues of creation, if and how God intervenes in the world, and what Quakers mean by seeking to discern God's will.

Session 3: The 3rd person God, in the natural world

The crisis of sustainability and climate change means that the understanding of God as manifest throughout the living world is catching up fast. Does this new thinking change the God-debate? Do Friends have particular insights to contribute?

Session 4: The 1-2-3 of God: What can we say?

Any model of the divine is, by definition, inadequate. God cannot be contained by language. But we can use language as a tool to deepen our thinking. In this fourth session, we hope to capture, in words, some of the findings we have made on our journey together.

PROPOSED MATERIAL FOR THE NEXT NONTHEIST FRIENDS BOOK

You are invited to submit proposals by October 1st for chapters or short essays in a new book that we hope to publish in 2015. The book editors, at present, are Os Cresson, Wallace Watson (in the United States) and Michael Wright in Britain, although we are open to adding others to this editorial group. The book will be organized much as the one published eight years ago by 27 nontheist Friends, *Godless for God's Sake: Nontheism in Contemporary Quakerism*. (available through www.quakerbooks.org).

You may write about your experience as nontheist Friends and about issues raised by nontheism among Friends. Proposals may be as long as you want. Completed chapters will be up to 4500 words and short essays up to 550 words. You may submit as many proposals as you want. Soon after the October 1st deadline we will let you know which have been selected for the book. The deadline for completed work will be announced later but it will probably be about March 1, 2015.

Please send your proposals Michael Wright by October 1st 2014. Proposals that are accepted will require the completed articles by November 30th.

Book review

The Quest for a Moral Compass – a global history of ethics – by Kenan Malik

I read an excellent review of this book in the catholic weekly The Tablet and bought the book. It is very readable for the non-specialist: informative, engaging, descriptive, challenging, and raises many issues that are important in human relationships and well-being.

He explores the history of moral thought from the earliest Greek thinkers to the modern day. He explores not just the religious traditions that many of us are familiar with – the Christian, Jewish and Muslim ones – but also those of India, China, and Persia. The enlightenment, humanism and atheism all have a place in his account of the great philosophers and their ideas about “the good life”.

He shows how, through history, social circumstances and political ideas have shaped ideas about ethics and morality, alongside or interwoven with religious convictions.

Kenan Malik is a panellist on BBC Radio 4’s Moral Maze, and a writer and lecturer.

I read the book on my Kindle on holiday, but I have also bought a print version which I shall re-read and make notes. It is the best book I have come across in many years to give a description of different philosophical ideas, in such a readable form. It challenges me to think more thoroughly about some of the foundations of my own philosophy of life.

Michael Wright

Objection Overruled: Conscription & Conscience in the First World War.

Michael kindly invited me to contribute a few words about my new book, *Objection Overruled: Conscription and Conscience in the First World War*. I say ‘new book’, but the first edition came out half a century ago for the 50th anniversary of the war. It was sponsored by Bertrand Russell and Fenner Brockway, two of the three principal leaders of the No-Conscription Fellowship, and *The Observer* described it as ‘clear, comprehensive, shocking, and destined to become the classic account of the men who fought for the right to say no to war’.

It’s an odd experience, reviving something you wrote half a century ago and had almost entirely forgotten! But the new edition has a lot of additional material. It covers both the religious and the political conscientious objectors – and of course many of them made no distinction between religion and politics. In fact, some of the most passionately religious expression of conscientious objection came from the two most conspicuously atheists!

Clifford Allen, chair of the N-CF, wrote: ‘It is chiefly by the expression of religious impulses through political action that we may hope to change men’s heart in practice’. And Bertrand Russell wrote ‘Our aim is to bring the Kingdom of Heaven – nothing less’. One Quaker writer commented that the speeches of both atheists

would not have been out of place in Yearly Meeting! I'm sure we could have recruited them into the NFN!

Objection Overruled is available from the Quaker Centre Bookshop (www.quaker.org/shop or phone 020 7663 1030/1031). Profits go to Quaker peace work. **David Boulton**

Gretta Vosper lecture tour: September 24 – 28 2014

Gretta Vosper is a minister in the United Church of Canada, who describes herself on her website www.grettavosper.ca/ as a 'minister, author and atheist'.

Christianity - With or Without God

Wednesday 24 September 2014 7.30.p.m.

Has the word 'God' got so much baggage we should abandon it? Would Christianity be any the worse if we did? Gretta Vosper is an influential Canadian minister and author. She re-envisages Christianity from a post-theist point of view.

At: Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, 235 Shaftesbury Ave, London WC2H 8EP.

Contact: Alan Race

Phone: 0208 852 8377 **Email:** alan.race@pcnbritain.org.uk

Host: Progressive Christianity Network Britain

Cost: £10

Gretta Vosper writes of herself as post-theist, though she will agree to wear the label atheist if it starts a conversation. Her approach to Christianity first gained expression in her book *'With or without God: Why the way we live is more important than what we believe'*. Her latest book is *'Amen: What Prayer Can Mean in a World Beyond Belief'* is now available.

Wine and nibbles will be available from 6.30 pm and the lecture starts at 7.30pm. Expected finishing time is 9.00 pm.

The following weekend there will be a conference in Oxford

Friday 26 September 2014 — Sunday 28
September 2014

Cost: Friday £6, Saturday £16, full weekend £20. Sunday collection.

What do we mean by God and is the word past its use-by date? What would a post-theistic church be for? These are the questions that Gretta Vosper will be considering at this conference. She will be assisted by her husband, Scott Kearns, whose speciality is post-theist words and songs. There will be three events.

Gretta will talk about the concepts surrounding the word 'God', going on to explain what a post-theistic church would be like and why it is worth having. She will be assisted by her husband, Scott Kearns, who writes non-theistic music and songs.

Gretta's Friday evening talk will be a more informal account of her personal faith journey and how her own congregation has adapted and stayed with her.

Gretta Vosper is minister at the West Hill United Church in Toronto. She writes of herself as post-theist, though she will agree to wear the label atheist if it starts a conversation. The subtitles of her two books illustrate where she stands:

With or without God: *Why the way we live is more important than what we believe* and
Amen: *What prayer can mean in a world beyond belief.*

Accommodation: Progressive Christianity Network have arranged a discounted room rate (double or twin) plus breakfast for two at the Holiday Inn. The cost is £80 on Friday and £100 on Saturday, with no cancellation fee up to 4pm on 26th September

Programme: Friday evening - refreshments and registration at **7pm for a 7.30 start.**

Saturday registration starts at 10am for 10.30 start. Refreshments will be available through the day. We are also aiming to include a light lunch in the price of the ticket. The day finishes at 4pm.

The **Sunday events are in Somerville College Chapel, OX26HD, starting at 9.30am** with a rehearsal followed by the non-theistic liturgy at 11am and then refreshments in the College gallery bar at noon. Gretta and her husband will rehearse and then lead a non-theistic liturgy on Sunday 28th which will include a message from Gretta.

Plans for an extended tour which included cities in the north of England have had to be cancelled due to financial constraints. We apologise to those who will be disappointed by this. We hope that a return visit will be possible at which these venues will have a priority.

Booking Details

Prices: £6 Friday, £16 Saturday, £20 combined. The events at Somerville college on Sunday are free though a collection will be taken to help defray the costs of hiring the chapel and the refreshments afterwards. You may book by downloading the booking form and sending it with a cheque to the address written on the form. Alternatively, you can book on-line by following the link to the PCN Britain website

To go straight to the downloadable booking form for both events: <http://goo.gl/z2fao5> (for postal booking by cheque)

To go straight to the online booking form for London: <http://goo.gl/INng3G> (for payment online)

To go straight to the online booking form for Oxford: <http://goo.gl/q62E1U>



NONTHEIST FRIENDS NETWORK

Our “yellow form”

The Network Steering Group would welcome information from you to know what talents, skills, experiences and views you have which can help promote the aim of the Network. If you care to provide this information to the Clerk it will enable us to consult you individually on certain matters, including opportunities to help others understand our aim, and for us to work with or alongside others on different journeys.

The Network’s aim is to provide a forum and supportive framework for Friends who regard religion as a human creation. We seek to explore theological and spiritual diversity, and their practical implications, in respectful acceptance of different views, experiences, and journeys.

Please use this template – you can copy and paste it into an email – and send me as many of these details as you are happy to provide us with. Very many thanks.

Michael Wright - michaelwright80@virginmedia.com

Name

Address

Phone number/s

Email

Local Meeting

Please share some of your experiences and interests as

A Quaker – fulfilling Quaker responsibilities

Working with people whose views are different from yours

Areas of particular interest and concern

Are you willing to consider responding to invitations to act in the following ways?

Public speaking

Facilitating groups

Planning learning events

Writing/editing/proof reading

Researching

Creative arts

Environmental and sustainability issues

Exploring spiritual diversity – including secular spirituality

Other

DO LOOK AT OUR WEBSITE - <http://www.nontheist-quakers.org.uk>

and – if you are a paid-up member – join our on-line discussion group

it is well worth looking at these American Nontheist Friends websites

nontheist-friends@googlegroups.com and the website www.nontheistfriends.org

NONTHEIST FRIENDS NETWORK



NEWS

July 2014

If you are coming to Britain Yearly Meeting Gathering at Bath
please make yourself known to
Michael Wright (Clerk of NFN) **07966 527697** michaelwright80@virginmedia.com

I hope you will make a note of the following sessions

* * *

NFN Informal Group Session

Sunday 1 – 2.p.m. Large Marquee with NFN Members

**Miriam Branson, Membership Secretary;
Sarah Richards, Treasurer; Michael Wright, Clerk**

* * *

Faith: what's God got to do with it?

Chancellor's Building 1.11 (conversations: QCCIR/NFN)

Mon, Tues, & Thurs 15.45 – 16.45 Tues 14.15-15.15

Michael Wright & Sarah Richards from NFN

* * *

Prayer Beyond Belief

Thursday, Chancellor's Building 4.8

15.15 – 16.15p.m. **Michael Wright**

* * *

Groups Fair

Big Top 19.30 – 21.00

Tuesday & Wednesday – volunteers to help, welcome

***We will be grateful for support and help at the Special Interest Group
Fair on Tuesday & Wednesday August 5 & 6, 7.30 – 9.p.m.***

Events we are involved in at Bath

QCCIR conversations - Faith – what has God got to do with it?

The programme states: “Quaker Committee for Christian and Interfaith Relations (QCCIR) has invited the Nontheist Friends Network to help us deepen our corporate spiritual experience by finding ways to express the inexpressible, by responding to descriptions of the nature of the divine using philosopher Ken Wilber’s model of the 1-2-3 of God, as applied to Friends by Felicity Kahl. (Her essay won the third prize in the Quaker Essay Competition 2019 and was published in Friends Quarterly Issue 2, 2010)

Monday 15.45-16.45 The 1st person God, immanent – The first three sessions will open with brief presentations, followed by time for discussion. We begin on firm ground: the God within, ‘that of God’, is the understanding of God with which Friends are most comfortable. *Note: to attend the final session of this Journey, you must have attended one of the first three.*

Tuesday 14.15 – 13.15 The 2nd person God, transcendent – Understanding God ‘out there’, the power which created and sustains the world, is more problematic. In this session we shall think about issues of creation, if and how God intervenes in the world, and what Quakers mean by seeking to discern God’s will. *Note: to attend the final session of this Journey, you must have attended one of the first three.*

Tuesday 15.45 – 16.45 The 3rd person God, in the natural world. The crisis of sustainability and climate change means that the understanding of God as manifest throughout the living world is catching up fast. Does this new thinking change the God-debate? Do Friends have particular insights to contribute? *Note: to attend the final session of this Journey, you must have attended one of the first three.*

Thursday 15.45 – 16.45 The 1-2-3 of God: What can we say? Any model of the divine is, by definition, inadequate. God cannot be contained by language. But we can use language as a tool to deepen our thinking. In this fourth session, we hope to capture, in words, some of the findings we have made on our journey together. *Note: to attend the final session of this Journey, you must have attended one of the first three.*

Quaker Universalist Group

We have invited the Quaker Universalist Group to enter into discussions with NFN about possible areas of co-operation. I shall be beginning those discussions at Bath with Tony Philpott, who is presenting a workshop on the aims and recent activities of the Group. He is the author of their most recent publication: “From Christian to Quaker – a spiritual journey from evangelical Christianity to universalist Quaker”. The Group have invited NFN to propose one of us to speak at their Woodbrooke weekend conference in May 2015, and I shall be doing that. Michael Wright

NFN Informal Group Session

Sunday 1 – 2.p.m. Large Marquee with

Miriam Branson, Membership Secretary;
Sarah Richards, Treasurer; Michael Wright, Clerk

This is an opportunity for us to explain what the Nontheist Friends Network is and aims to do.

The Network's aim is to provide a forum and supportive framework for Friends who regard religion as a human creation. We seek to explore theological and spiritual diversity and their practical implications, in respectful acceptance of different views, experiences, and journeys.

I hope we shall gain some new Members of the Network there.

SPECIAL INTEREST GROUP FAIR

in The Big Top – with about 60 other stalls

We have Tuesday and Wednesday evenings 7.30 – 9.p.m. with a table top display, and hopefully a number of members of our Network, to explain/discuss nontheism and our network to people who drop by to enquire who we are, and what we are about.

If you are there, I hope you will drop by

Prayer beyond belief - Tuesday August 5 – 3.45-4.45 p.m. in Chancellor's Building 4TH Floor, Room 8. The description of this event in the programme reads:

'This session explores ways of prayer, including thankfulness, wonder, concerns, and self-examination that are spiritual exercises that are not directed at God. Michael Wright has returned to some of the disciplines of prayer with a new freedom of spirit, and refreshment. Previously accustomed to Anglican forms of prayer, and finding himself "bereaved of God", he has rediscovered for himself a nontheist spirituality which he finds life enhancing.'

Being a Quaker today

At Yearly Meeting Gathering at Bath, the focus is on commitment and belonging, including an exploration of what membership means for Friends.

“What does it mean to be a Quaker today?” Is the question we are being asked to respond to. In the June edition, I invited readers of this Newsletter to write a response to help us all with our thinking. Anne is the only person who has responded, and this is what she has written.

What does it mean to be a Quaker today?

We live, as previous generations could not, in the knowledge of a world of almost incredible diversity. We know that humankind is one species, one race, but that it includes apparently irreconcilable world views and ideologies. So where can Quakers stand? We are adjured to “be open to new light from whatever source it may come”, and this new richness of global knowledge allows that bountifully. It also reveals appalling darkneses, which if we are to confront will require tact, skill, determination and a sense of the divine potential (spark or seed, in old Quaker parlance) even in the worst.

The temptation is to cower in the safety of comfortable F/friendships, to fill our lives busily with Quaker affairs. Perhaps our challenge now is to let fall the minutiae of minutes and committees; to be alongside those we don’t agree with and – trusting in the power of love – to establish real communication with a world many of us are afraid of.

To be a Quaker today we may still draw on the strategies of the past: first the spiritual empowerment of Meeting for Worship, followed by quiet consideration in small circles, then the reaching out. But outreach will not be preaching for recruitment. Rather it will mean making our testimonies plain in whatever form of words suits those we encounter: simple words like compassion and truth and justice and care for the earth. It will mean turning those words into action along with people of other faiths and none.

Hafiz, a Persian poet of the 14th century, can teach us our place:

I am a hole in a flute that the Christ’s breath moves through. Listen to this music.

Anne Ashworth
Lancashire Central and North AM, Preston LM

We are invited to respond to three specific questions. I am a bit puzzled by them, and find it difficult to articulate my responses. Here are my initial thoughts:

- **How does your being a member or not a member affect your feeling of commitment and belonging to your Quaker meeting and to the broader Quaker community?**

Being a Member is important to me, and I am committed to my Quaker meeting and the broader Quaker community. I am puzzled as to why so many long-term Attenders choose not to become Members. I see being a Member as a commitment to the Quaker way, and an opportunity to serve.

- **If you are in membership, did something change for you, and in you, when you became a member? Did you feel different, more responsible, perhaps even transformed?**

I became a member in 2000. It was psychologically important to have laid aside my Anglican commitment and to have chosen to make a Quaker commitment. I was surprised to find the process of becoming a member did not require much preparation, nor any course of instruction in Quaker ways. I found I was expected to absorb these by osmosis. I began to feel different and more relaxed when I started coming to my local Meeting, and the act of becoming a Member was just a natural step – certainly no ‘road to Damascus’ moment.

- **What is the continuing spiritual effect of membership?**

I am committed to the Quaker community, its ethos and testimonies, value QFP and the A&Q, I am also committed to supporting Quakers who want to explore theological ideas and traditions, and Friends who are prepared to explore, experiment, try new ways, and communicate our Quakerism to the wider world. I feel that the practices and values of Quakers are very much needed in community and commercial life – a commitment to peace, to integrity, to simplicity, to diversity and equality, focused on a spiritual vision and practice that I find deeply valuable.

Michael Wright Teesdale and Cleveland AM, Middlesbrough LM.

* * *

Long Term Framework

Friends are invited to participate in the consultation to draft a new Long Term Framework for 2015-2020 for Britain Yearly Meeting.

The Working Group, set up by Meeting for Sufferings stressed that the consultation process should involve all Quakers in Britain. The report quotes Julia Gordon, Clerk of the Working Group that they want it to be ‘flexible, buoyant and dynamic’. She urged Friends throughout Britain to take part in the consultation process. Its aim is to create a ‘clear, shared vision of the future’. She stressed the word ‘clarity’ in articulating ‘our varied leadings’ and also the value of feedback.

The key questions we are asked to consider are:

- What do Quakers hold in common?
- What principles and processes make our work ‘Quaker’ to us and to others?
- What national structures would enable your Meeting to flourish?
- What is your five-year vision for your Local Meeting, for Quakers in Britain and for the world?

These surely are questions we in the Nontheist Friends Network need to respond to. PLEASE EMAIL ME, OR WRITE ME A LETTER, AND LET ME KNOW WHAT YOU THINK SO THAT WE CAN MAKE A CONSTRUCTIVE RESPONSE FROM OUR MEMBERSHIP TO THIS INVITATION by the middle of January 2015

Revising Quaker Faith and Practice

In preparation for a decision at Yearly Meeting Gathering as to whether or not to revise our current edition of Quaker Faith and Practice, the new edition of Friends Quarterly concentrates on what might be involved. In an interview with **Paul Parker, Recording Clerk**, Friends Quarterly asked him if this revision is likely to increase the risk of schism in Britain Yearly Meeting. He replied:

“British Quakers have tended to prize unity over schism. On the whole, we see it as part of our identity that we stick together, and I am reasonably comfortable that our sense of wanting to be a united Yearly Meeting will prevail. However, I think there are issues where there is a risk of us becoming polarized and seeing things as black and white rather than as a spectrum of Quaker grey.

Probably the best example of that is the current discussion around theism and non-theism. The basic issue has always been there; the last time the Book of Discipline was revised it took the form of a discussion between Universalists and the New Foundation Fellowship. What bothers me at the moment is a perceived polarization, that you have to be either one or the other, whereas actually there is a spectrum.....

...I want us to talk about experience rather than language. However that means finding a mutually intelligible language to do it in. What will be important is that we try and listen through the language to what somebody is actually saying about their experience.”

Tony Stoller, the Editor of Friends Quarterly recommends Friends read Ross Chapman’s account of Friends experience in Ireland in FQ issue number one 2013 in which he gives an account of the 14 year saga leading to the publication in 2012 of their revised book of discipline *Quaker Life and Practice*. It is very illuminating.

The discussions which Quaker Committee for Christian and Interfaith Relations (QCCIR) have arranged – in January at Friends House, and next week at Bath – on *Faith: what’s God got to do with it?* Will, I hope, contribute to a constructive and truly Friendly exploration of issues that will avoid polarization. Living adventurously together with difference can be the keynote that we seek to bring to this lengthy discernment process. Michael Wright

* * *

DO LOOK AT OUR WEBSITE - <http://www.nontheist-quakers.org.uk>

and – if you are a paid-up member – join our on-line discussion group.

It is well worth looking at these American Nontheist Friends websites

nontheist-friends@googlegroups.com and the website www.nontheistfriends.org

John Champney's Journey to Quakers

John found NFN's website, and offered an account of his journey to Quakers, which others may find of interest. Ed.

As a child Jesus was my 'bestest friend ever', somebody who would be a friend and playmate, somebody so intimate that he would rest in the deepest recess of what made me 'me'; he would live not just in 'my' heart but in the Heart of every other child as well. Yet more than that, he would stay within the core once she had turned into a 'Grown-up', if the grown-up made a place for Him there. Yet this simple conviction began to cloud when my religious diet moved from the gentle drip-feed of the Sunday School teacher to the warnings from Billy Graham and other teachers too about the hell I would go to if I didn't study the Bible. By degrees, Jesus had become a threat and was no longer the Jesus I knew.

The edicts and sentences of "God wants us to..." had become enormously problematic. 'Praying' too was difficult because I had started to think if 'thy Will be done' why 'pray' for an outcome which might not be in accordance with The Divine Will? And when I reflected further on this, I came to wonder why I was assuming that there *was* a Divine Will? Little by little it was becoming very confusing! My unsettled soul became astonished too at the sects and factions of religion, some of whom seemed more to be at war with one another than at peace. Disagreement was always there as was felt in some of the popular songs of the seventies, with the rock band Jethro Tull singing, "So I asked this God a question, and by way of firm reply, he said: 'I'm not the kind you have to wind up on Sundays.'"

The teens and twenties saw me journeying, in body and in mind, into Non-dual Hinduism and India. In this vast ocean of manifold faiths and methods rested a unity which for me was almost tangible: within the Trinity of Gods Brahma, Vishnu and Siva rested the understanding that all these Gods were really One, and even the One could not be seen as 'other' in the final reckoning. If the separate state persisted, then even the notions of 'me' and 'you' would negate the unity and Unity in diversity was something which Quakers strove hard to reach and maintain. This was beginning to settle into a place where I could feel relaxed, at home and not conflicted. So joining a Quaker Meeting in the 'seventies seemed to lead on as a natural turn of events. I felt very much at home and made some good friends there, even though I knew very little about the practice. Nothing was 'rammed down my throat' any more and in the Silence, concepts fell away as the conviction gradually began to dawn on me that 'God' itself was yet another concept used as a peg on which we hung our ideas. Some churchgoers may 'wind their God up on Sundays' before getting fresh and ready for 'proper' work on Monday morning, but this did not apply to The Quakers whose workaday life was not divorced from their inner convictions but was quietly integrated. Quakers walked the Walk of practicality.

Diving again into the ocean of Quakerism

By 2013 I had dived twice into the ocean of Quakerism — first in the 'seventies and next in the 'nineties. Now, on the third dip, I find myself attending again in the naughtie 'teens, in the Jesus Lane Meeting in Cambridge, whose building and atmosphere have been a spiritual refuge to me for many years. However finding out more about the movement has led to some surprises.

I've known for a long time that Christianity was the cornerstone of the Quaker Faith. That was never a problem for me: while reading and studying these I would 'translate' much of the terminology into the non-dual Hindu terms which made sense to me. So God the Father in Hindu terminology was the 'Unseen Brahman' in which everything rested, or the 'Higher Self'. Christ was the crystallized form of this Unseen on whom we could focus. Doing this in our quietened mind returned us to our own True Selves, to the formless restful state where we were no longer encumbered by the pain and suffering of our birth. Our own 'souls' while we considered ourselves to be separate beings, suffered a lot of hardship but as we had clambered through so much of this separation which had been going on through so many lifetimes, our ordeals were puny in comparison. 'Christ', seen as the direct and one time expression of the Brahman in solid form, came directly from the Source. Thus the glorious light from this temporary form was highly intensified, like the sun's brilliance compared to the light of the moon (which it borrows and reflects anyway). As the light and glory was intensified, so also was the pain and suffering. All of it, the joy and the pain, was in the Christ form, too intense to be very long-lived. It was the same with Krishna.

By now naming and praying to a God had become really problematic for me and I wondered why the doing of duty, performing needful works and alleviating suffering and correcting injustice should not be its own reward. I had always thought that doing these things was its own satisfaction for Quakers anyway, yet as I found out more about it I became surprised at the reliance on God and on Christianity.

What has attracted me so strongly to the Nontheist Camp is that after years of wandering in the spiritual wilderness I feel that it is time for me to settle down and find somewhere to pitch my tent. I have had wonderful periods of my life in the Christian, Hindu, Buddhist and even Nihilist fields. All of them have been interesting, and I feel I've carried valuable seeds from the various pastures I've lived in, but as my lifetime draws nearer its end, I get a good restful feeling from this newly discovered corner in the human mind-field where the grass is soft, lush and untrampled.

Fishes swim in water and water permeates their every cell. Yet the fish has to do the job of being a fish. It's fine if believing in this unseen 'water' assists it in that, but it is not essential. A cake maker may be convinced in the use of cream of tartar, but an equally good cake can be made without it.

John Champneys: June 2014

Friends, War and Peacemakers

David Boulton's book *Objection Overruled: Conscription and Conscience in the First World War* was published in May in association with Friends Historical Society, and David has embarked on a series of talks and lectures around the country. To date he has visited Lancaster, Cartmel and Leiston, and lectured at the Anglo-American Historians conference in London and at Liverpool Hope University. After a summer break he will be back on the road as follows:

September 24, Leek,

October 2, Beverley,

October 8, Lancaster University

October 9, Liverpool (John Hamilton Memorial Peace Lecture)

October 16, Bunhill Fields, London

(Association of Denominational Historians)

October 24, Kendal

November 1, Crooklands

November 4, Bampton

November 5, Ludlow (Olivier Memorial Peace Lecture)

November 8, Seaford

November 20, Middlesbrough

December 3, Sedbergh

For details of times and venues email dboultondent@btinternet.com

David is also the keynote speaker at a one-day conference organised by the well-known Carrs Lane progressive church, Birmingham, on Saturday October 18. He has been invited to speak and lead a public discussion on his book *The Trouble with God: Building the Republic of Heaven*. Previous speakers in the Carrs Lane series have been Jack Spong, Karen Armstrong and Richard Holloway. More details in a later Newsletter.

Gretta Vosper lecture tour: September 24 - 28

Christianity - With or Without God

Wednesday 24 September 2014 7.30.p.m.

At: Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, 235 Shaftesbury Ave, London WC2H 8EP.

Contact: Alan Race

Phone: 0208 852 8377 **Email:** alan.race@pcnbritain.org.uk

Host: Progressive Christianity Network Britain

Cost: £10

Gretta Vosper writes of herself as post-theist, though she will agree to wear the label atheist if it starts a conversation. Her approach to Christianity first gained expression in her book 'With or without God: Why the way we live is more important than what we believe'. Her latest book is 'Amen: What Prayer Can Mean in a World Beyond Belief' is now available.

Wine and nibbles will be available from 6.30 pm and the lecture starts at 7.30pm. Expected finishing time is 9.00 pm.

The following weekend there will be a conference in Oxford

Friday 26 September 2014 — Sunday 28
September 2014

Cost: Friday £6, Saturday £16, full weekend £20. Sunday collection.

What do we mean by God and is the word past its use-by date? What would a post-theistic church be for? These are the questions that Gretta Vosper will be considering at this conference. She will be assisted by her husband, Scott Kearns, whose speciality is post-theist words and songs. There will be three events.

Gretta will talk about the concepts surrounding the word 'God', going on to explain what a post-theistic church would be like and why it is worth having. She will be assisted by her husband, Scott Kearns, who writes non-theistic music and songs.

Gretta's Friday evening talk will be a more informal account of her personal faith journey and how her own congregation has adapted and stayed with her.

Gretta Vosper is minister at the West Hill United Church in Toronto. She writes of herself as post-theist, though she will agree to wear the label atheist if it starts a conversation. The subtitles of her two books illustrate where she stands:

With or without God: *Why the way we live is more important than what we believe* and

Amen: *What prayer can mean in a world beyond belief.*

Accommodation: Progressive Christianity Network have arranged a discounted room rate (double or twin) plus breakfast for two at the Holiday Inn. The cost is £80 on Friday and £100 on Saturday, with no cancellation fee up to 4pm on 26th September

Programme: Friday evening - refreshments and registration at **7pm for a 7.30 start.**

Saturday registration starts at 10am for 10.30 start. Refreshments will be available through the day. We are also aiming to include a light lunch in the price of the ticket. The day finishes at 4pm.

The **Sunday events are in Somerville College Chapel, OX26HD, starting at 9.30am** with a rehearsal followed by the non-theistic liturgy at 11am and then refreshments in the College gallery bar at noon. Gretta and her husband will rehearse and then lead a non-theistic liturgy on Sunday 28th which will include a message from Gretta.

Plans for an extended tour which included cities in the north of England have had to be cancelled due to financial constraints. We apologise to those who will be disappointed by this. We hope that a return visit will be possible at which these venues will have a priority.

Booking Details

Prices: £6 Friday, £16 Saturday, £20 combined. The events at Somerville college on Sunday are free though a collection will be taken to help defray the costs of hiring the chapel and the refreshments afterwards. You may book by downloading the booking form and sending it with a cheque to the address written on the form. Alternatively, you can book on-line by following the link to the PCN Britain website

To go straight to the downloadable booking form for both events:
<http://goo.gl/z2fao5> (for postal booking by cheque)

To go straight to the online booking form for London: <http://goo.gl/INng3G> (for payment online)

To go straight to the online booking form for Oxford: <http://goo.gl/q62E1U>

- end -

NONTHEIST FRIENDS NETWORK

www.nontheist-quakers.org.uk

NEWS

September 2014



Making our positive contribution to Friends

There are a number of ways in which we can all make a positive contribution to the discussions and consultations which Friends will be having in the coming months.

- **Contributing ideas to the Long-term Framework**
- **Response to the 2014 Swarthmore Lecture by Ben Pink Dandelion – a conservative vision of the way forward for Quakers in Britain.**
- **Topics to include in our Annual Conference at Woodbrooke March 20-22**
- **Responding to the Review of Listed Informal Groups**
- **Offering thoughts on reviewing Quaker Faith and Practice**

Long-term Framework for Action 2015-2012

The Group given the task of drafting the Framework for Action for 2015-2012 ask us all to contribute to a wide-ranging consultation. *“We hope it will encourage more Friends to work on shared concerns and to speak in unity to the world”* they say. They offer these questions as *“prompts to your discernment”*.

- **What is distinctive about Quaker work and witness, to us and to others?**
- **What is your vision of the ministry that your local meeting and Quakers in Britain are called to, now and in the future?**
- **What are we led to do together?**
- **How could Quaker structures and networks help Quakers in Britain to flourish?**

These are matters to which we can contribute in our local meetings. **Any written contributions you would like to share with others in this Network you are very welcome to send to me for publication in the next Newsletter.** Individuals and groups are invited to send in our contributions to Friends House by January 31st 2015.

The matter will no doubt come to Yearly Meeting in London, May 1st – 4th 2015. Some of the ideas we offer could well be part of our discussions at our Annual Conference at Woodbrooke, March 20-22.

Swarthmore Lecture & Book

There is also the opportunity to share your responses to the vision which Ben Pink Dandelion offered in his Swarthmore Lecture 2014 at Bath, and the book which flows from it. The book is called ***“Open for transformation: Being Quaker”***. It is a conservative approach which seems to be wanting to draw the Society back to some era of Quaker authenticity about 100 years ago. At the end of his book he offers a discussion programme for Friends to use in groups in their Local Meetings. He is inviting people to respond to his challenging theme.

I have prepared my own response which I am inviting you all to read, and
if you think it appropriate, to forward it to any Friends who you think might be interested to read it,
as part of their preparation for taking part in any series of discussions on Ben’s book.

My paper is called
Being Quaker Now – a different way of being open for transformation.
I am having some copies printed and available at £2 each (£2.50 by post from me), but I am hoping it will reach most people via email.

I very much hope you will print one or two copies and leave them on a literature table in their Meeting Houses, so that as many Friends as possible become aware of an alternative way from Ben’s of being open to transformation.

It will certainly be helpful if you will print a copy for any Friend who does not use email, but who you think would be interested to read it. It comes as a separate file attachment with this Newsletter.

Topics for Woodbrooke Conference March 20-22.2015

The Steering Group will meet in York on October 15 to plan our Annual Conference at Woodbrooke next March 20-22. We have a number of ideas of our own, and will welcome any ideas you have to offer us. What would you like to see on our programme?

Please send them to me by October 13 - michaelwright80@virginmedia.com

Review of Informal Groups

Meeting for Sufferings has established a Review of Listed Informal Groups, of which this Network is one. Its purpose is to review the current arrangements for recognising Listed Informal Groups, and propose new arrangements, which may involve different categories of relationship and/or support; or replacing or abandoning the arrangement altogether.

We do not know whether this Group will consult with all the existing Listed Informal Groups or not. We hope they will, and we will seek to discern what our responses will be.

Possible review of Quaker Faith and Practice

These extracts from the Minutes of Britain Yearly Meeting at Bath 2014 explain where we are:

From - Minute 20: Revision of the Book of Discipline

We note that the book of discipline, *Quaker faith & practice*, was last revised in 1994, although the last full revision of the church government sections was undertaken in 1967. The request for a revision originated with area meetings minutes in 2012, which initiated a formal consultation which was completed in November 2013.

Our consideration this evening has not reached the point where we can respond to Meeting for Sufferings' minute. Some Friends are urging that we proceed to a revision now but we have also heard a number of voices calling for caution, and time to resolve certain differences within the Yearly Meeting. There are also those who feel that we as a yearly meeting are simply not ready. We agree to return to this matter later in this Yearly Meeting.

Minute 42: Revision of the book of discipline (continued)

Further to minute 20, we have heard an introduction describing Meeting for Sufferings' decision process in bringing this matter before us and its plans for a preparation group.

With some regret we find ourselves in the position through lack of time where we cannot reach unity on whether to initiate the process of revision, although some Friends feel that we need to start immediately. However, we are aware that Meeting for Sufferings through its preparation group will already be starting a process of discernment. We encourage it in this service and look forward to engaging with the work.

We ask Meeting for Sufferings to bring the matter back to Yearly Meeting when it feels that the time is ripe for a Revision Committee to start its work.

There will be the opportunity for Friends to contribute to the consideration of whether the time is right for a revision, and if it is so decided, every Friend in BYM will have the opportunity to contribute their discernment as to what is appropriate for such a revision to contain.

Reflections on Britain Yearly Meeting Gathering at Bath

We had a very full gathering of over 2,000 people at Bath. My impression was that there was less opportunity for contributions from the floor than I have known in previous Yearly Meetings, and Yearly Meeting Gatherings. It was sad that a large number of late applicants could not get in.

I found the evening Meeting for Worship on August 4th very moving. We gathered round the green in the gathering darkness, with our torches. Then one by one the torches were extinguished as we gave thought to the awful anniversary we were marking. After about 10 minutes, the torches started to light up again as a symbol of new light and hope.

The Quaker garden which some Friends constructed during the week is left as a gift to the university from Friends. It is lovely, and well worth visiting if you are in Bath.

The most impressive 'fringe' event I went to was the Salter Lecture of the Quaker Socialist Society. It was delivered by Richard Murphy. His subject was: Tax Justice. He examined the global tax system, and the variety of ways in which corporations and individuals avoid paying tax. The effect on communities and countries world-wide is crippling. The services which particularly suffer are those for health and hygiene, education, and the potential for improving the quality of life and standard of living of millions of people. Richard is an accountant, an economist, a Quaker, and a campaigner for tax justice. He was described in the International Tax Review as the 7th most influential person in global tax in 2013. His is a Concern I hope many of us share.

Advertising NFN – Sarah Richards and myself had opportunities to advertise ourselves and what we aim to do. About 60 people came to the Special Interest Group meeting we held on Sunday at 1.p.m. We had a large new display banner outside the tent advertising ourselves. Many people took leaflets about the Network.

At the Groups Fair on both Tuesday and Wednesday evenings, a large number of people came and talked to us, and we gathered quite a few people who wished to be on our emailing list, and I hope many of them will choose to join the Network.

Prayer beyond belief – I led an hour's session on aspects of prayer beyond belief: awe and wonder, thankfulness, self-examination, and concerns, with silent spaces to explore each one. I had asked for a room for 30 people – 58 people turned up. It was much appreciated by people who felt it gave them ideas of ways of praying that are not focused on God.

Quaker Universalist Group – Tony Philpott (from QUG) and I took the opportunity to begin what we hope will be a constructive and continuing conversation between NFN and QUG. We want to explore what areas of common ground there are between our two groups. We will continue this into next year, and I will represent NFN at the QUG annual conference at Woodbrooke in May. I am in correspondence with Hazel Nelson, Chair of QUG, and she has accepted an article from me for the February edition of their magazine which she edits.

Swarthmore Lecture – Some Friends, new to Quakers, who came to our Sunday Group and who were glad to find that nontheism can be an acceptable way of being Quaker, came to me in some distress after hearing the Lecture. Having heard it, they felt they were in the wrong place, and that there was really no welcome for them within Quakers. Their reactions, together with my own, prompted me to write my response to the Lecture, which is the separate attachment with this Newsletter.

QCCIR conversations. Both Sarah and I took part (two each) in the four sessions organised by Quaker Committee for Christian and Interfaith Relations. These were

short introductions by people of different theological perspectives, theist and nontheist, continuing the theme of the January conference: *Faith, what has God got to do with it?* Here is the agreed Minute, at which Sarah was able to be present at the drafting but I wasn't.

Faith: What's God got to do with it? Minute of a Journey

A group of Friends, some from the Quaker Committee on Christian and Interfaith Relations [QCCIR] and some from the Nontheist Friends' Network {NFN} have met together with other interested Friends over four Journey sessions at our Yearly Meeting Gathering in Bath, to see each others' faces and to listen in love and respect to the light in each others' experience.

This exercise has deepened the way we listen, as we have tried to say something about God, or whatever you call it, and to help one another by sharing our experience of leadings in our lives. We have used the philosopher Ken Wilber's model of the 1-2-3 of God, as applied to Friends by Felicity Kaal in her Friends' Quarterly essay in 2010, as a map to start us on our journey together. This gave us a framework of 1. God, immanent; 2. God, transcendent; and 3. God in the natural world; and these were the remits for our first three meetings though sharing in each inevitably overlapped into the others.

Throughout all these sessions we struggled with words - different words to describe the same or similar things or the same words used to mean something very different. We reflected that any potential for polarisation between theist and nontheist positions may be a total distraction, an argument over the map delaying us from making the journey into experience. We note a fear among some Friends is that newcomers among us may not recognise the importance of our collective spiritual experience. Our journey together shows this fear to be unfounded. We need to look to the practice of God, of insight, beyond the words.

It has been a privilege and delight to be involved in our conversations together which have been open and respectful, allowing much deeper understanding of the layers of language we all use and of the baggage attached to our terminology. We have learned more about the need to respect each other's integrity and to accept the sincerity with which language is used. The exercise of deep listening is essential if we are to be able together to work in the world, attending to everyone's suffering with love, and 'answering that of God' in everyone we meet. However, understanding each other needs time, patience, listening and responding with love and care. Thoughtless reactions, wherever they come from, can cause pain, and censorship of language can damage others' integrity. We should not quench ministry but should share our differences in love, trust and honesty. We need to encourage this exercise of deep listening in our local and area meetings. We ask QCCIR to look to how this dialogue can be encouraged.

This minute was agreed in our fourth and final session together, 7 August 2014.

[signed] Christine A M Davis, clerk this time.

- end -

Newsletter Editor: Michael Wright michaelwright80@virginmedia.com

07966 527697

NONTHEIST FRIENDS NETWORK

www.nontheist-quakers.org.uk

NEWS

November 2014



**An Inclusive
Society of Friends**

Exploring ways in which all Friends
can live, work, and worship in
harmony

with **Jan Arriens**
(author of *Journeys in the Light*)


Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre,
Birmingham B29 6LJ

20-22 March 2015

For more details and Registration Form visit www.nontheist-quakers.org.uk

Or contact Sarah Richards, 8 Ashleigh Grove, Forest Hall,
Newcastle-upon-Tyne NE12 8EY, sarahrchds@yahoo.co.uk

The Nontheist Friends Network is a listed informal group of Britain
Yearly Meeting.



*** Booking form is a separate attachment with this email ***

INSIDE

- Fuller details of our March Woodbrooke weekend begins on the next page
- Looking for opportunities to share our inclusive vision
- Some possibilities of collaboration with other groups in 2015
- An evening with an A-theist Minister – by Brian Wardrop
- *Being Friends Together* – a new learning programme
- Some reactions to Ben's Swarthmore lecture – **in 2 separate attachments**

An Inclusive Society of Friends

Most of us thought we had joined an inclusive Society when we joined Friends. However there are some Friends who very much want to limit the boundaries of this inclusiveness. This issue will be at the heart of our Woodbrooke Weekend Conference and AGM March 20-22 2015.

Your Steering Group has invited **Jan Arriens** to be our keynote speaker. His lecture at Bath on *Spiritual connectedness* was printed in The Friend August 22. It is worth reading, and re-reading.

I asked Jan to write a few words to encapsulate his theme for our conference. This was his reply:

Far from being a radical offshoot at variance with traditional Quakerism, nontheism may be regarded as a logical development within liberal Quakerism. Its roots may be traced back to the Manchester Conference of 1895 and the emphasis placed by Rufus Jones on the mystical tradition.

Nontheism and religious belief may also be approached in terms of the distinction drawn by Karen Armstrong between *mythos* and *logos*. Was the way in which early Friends perceived and articulated the *mythos* in fact inherently different from what contemporary Friends are saying? The two aspects of head and heart need to be kept in balance; we need neither uncritical evangelism nor logic to the exclusion of the mystery.

Jan will open his consideration of our theme on the Friday evening.

Workshops

We have three workshops planned for the Saturday morning – each presented twice. ***We are open to offers from Friends who wish to present any other workshops twice that morning. If you do, please notify the Clerk by the end of February, so that I can notify the Steering Group for discernment.*** People will be able to attend two workshops of their choice.

An exercise of prayer

How can nontheists pray? (if they wish to). When I dropped God, I dropped prayer. In recent years I have re-evaluated the concept, and now practice ways in which I explore the wonder of life and relationships, examine myself both positively and critically, and fashion a way of considering my response to people and issues to which wish to make a difference. Years ago, I used to worship, to confess, to give thanks, and to ask God for all sorts of things. I have a found a new liberty and spiritual vigour in adopting practices that are not addressed to God – but are life-enhancing. The workshop will give people an opportunity to try out some of these ideas.

Michael Wright

A fish out of water?

This group will combine sharing about:

- What makes life easier for a non-theist in their local meeting?
- What makes life more difficult for a non-theist in their local meeting?

I hope we shall focus on ways of understanding and being part of a Quaker organisation which has a wide variety of ideas about what a Quaker should be, and that people will feel supported as a result.

Miriam Brand

Mind your Language

- What do we mean by 'inclusive' language?
- What is 'exclusive' language?
- How does inclusive/exclusive language make us feel, and what, therefore, are the implications for inreach and outreach?

This workshop aims to give us an opportunity to share our thoughts and experiences on these questions.

Jean and Brian Wardrop

Saturday afternoon – freetime to walk, sleep, explore the library, visit Cadbury World, chat or read – amongst other relaxations.

Annual General Meeting

This will take place from 4.30 – 6 p.m. on Saturday

Quaking with Laughter

This will again be a session of all the fun that Friends can devise. Please consider, over the next couple of months, something entertaining to share with us all that evening. It could be amusing, light-hearted, or a brain-teaser, music you make, a poem or a song, even a video presentation! Do let us know what you are willing to offer.

Plenary discussion

On Sunday morning, between breakfast (and clearing our rooms) and Meeting for Worship at 11, we will have a plenary discussion on how to take forward ideas that will have emerged from our speaker, from our workshops, and informal discussions on ways in which we can, individually and/or with others in the Network or in our own Meetings, contribute to ensuring our Society remains and grows as an Inclusive Society of Friends.

Please book early – before Christmas if you can

Long-term Framework for Action 2015-2012

Action for the next three months !!!

Many Local and Area Meetings have been considering ideas for the Framework for Action for 2015 – 2020. A draft of this Framework will be prepared after January 31st 2015. If you want to contribute – as a group or an individual – ideas have to be sent in by then. The Framework will be considered at Britain Yearly Meeting at Friends House, May 1 – 4 2015

The Group given the task of drafting the Framework for Action for 2015-2012 ask us all to contribute to a wide-ranging consultation. *“We hope it will encourage more Friends to work on shared concerns and to speak in unity to the world”* they say. They offer these questions as *“prompts to your discernment”*.

- a) What do Quakers hold in common?
- b) What principles & processes make our work “Quaker” to us & to others?
- c) What national structures would enable your meeting to flourish?
- d) What is your 5 year vision for your local meeting, for Quakers in Britain, & for the world?

These are matters to which we can contribute in our local meetings. Any written contributions you would like to share with others in this Network you are very welcome to send to me for publication in the next Newsletter.

Each of us could consider how we feed in our concern for Britain Yearly Meeting to remain and grow as an inclusive Society rather than an exclusive one. I suggest we need to do some constructive and imaginative thinking and contribute such thinking to the discernment on the new Framework for Action 2015-2012. MW

Email responses to: life@quaker.org.uk or post to: LFT consultation (Peter Senders), Friends House, 173 Euston Road, London. NW1 2BJ

The Network is exploring with the Quaker Universalist Group possible areas of work in which we might co-operate. Michael Wright will be speaking at their conference in May.

We are also writing to other Christian groups such as Progressive Christianity Network, Sea of Faith, Modern Church, and the Unitarian Church, to explore whether they would wish to co-operate in planning an event in 2015 with a speaker of international reputation. We will be grateful for other suggestions of groups to talk to.

An Evening with an A-theist Minister

Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church on 24 September was the scene for an evening talk by Greta Vosper, jointly organised by the Progressive Christianity Network (PCN), Sea of Faith, and the Nontheist Friends Network.

Greta Vosper is a United Church of Canada minister whose congregation is the West Hill United Church in Toronto, Canada, and a self-declared a-theist (note the hyphen).

She calls for churches to be theologically barrier-free communities in which individual, communal and global well-being are the primary goals. In this perspective, belief in a god does not play a central role.

Greta pointed out that the decline in UK church membership was much greater than the decline in the numbers of church clergy (I think this was C of E!), and asked why we needed to keep church going?

Her answer was that in the past we have had a deep and important sense of community which has dramatically fragmented over recent decades, so that people in a locality don't know each other, and live in small 'tribal' reality. Her congregation demonstrated this by taking neighbourhood walks around the church to try and connect with their neighbours – it was a failure.

She argued that the sense of wellbeing that comes from a church group is not due to the religious message, but the connectivity and sense of belonging that comes with a healthy and active congregation. The problem is that members of the congregation who lose belief in a higher authority leave, and those who are left are comfortable with traditional doctrine.

Having been theologically educated, she is aware that the advances in interpretation of theological texts and ideas fail to make it through to church services that she was giving. Her 20 minute sermon delivered from the reasoning (left) side of her brain was wrapped in ancient language and hymns which appealed to the spiritual (right) side of the brain, and were lost. She even did an impromptu sermon in which she took the concept of God apart and 'left it in pieces on the floor' with little effect!

With the agreement of her governing Board, she set to trying to find some way of reconciling these right-hand/left-hand world views into a progressive perspective that:

- a) must be open to new ideas
- b) must be passionate and creative

c) must be intellectually rigorous and promulgate it by being:

i) honest ii) courageous (in the face of inevitable backlash from the traditionalists)

iii) respectful (the message has to be convincing without attacking the receiver)

iv) balanced

Trying to explain what she believed was wrong with Christian teaching, she looked at a variety of areas (geography, astronomy, medicine, sex, Christianity) and compared their paradigms [a paradigm is the collection of beliefs and theories relating to a subject] in the 17th century and the present. Christianity alone has a current paradigm which contains much of the 17th century paradigm despite the intervening discoveries. She likened this to a cafeteria where the trays [subjects] are regularly cleaned and refreshed with improved food [paradigms], but in the case of Christianity, the trays are not cleaned, but other trays are added, resulting in a mess of decay, obsolescence and confusion.

As part of her development of an alternative approach for her West Hill congregation, she undertook an exercise of spreading on the floor a variety of pictures, and asked members to pick up one that reminded them of God. She found that no one picked a picture of a person, and concluded that members of the congregation were not taking a theistic view.

Following this she developed church services for her congregation that did not make use of traditional prayers or hymns, but were based on God attributes and concentrated on how we want to live; such as love expressed through compassion. Great care is taken to use inclusive language.

She does include prayers, but these are carefully crafted to ensure that the language can be accepted by both theists and non-theists. For example:

**As I live every day, I want to be a channel for peace.
May I bring love where there is hatred and healing where there is hurt;
joy where there is sadness and hope where there is fear.**

**I pray that I may always try to understand and comfort other people
as well as seeking comfort and understanding from them.**

**Wherever possible may I choose to be
a light in the darkness a help in times of need and a caring, honest friend.**

**And may justice, kindness, and peace flow from my heart forever. Amen
*Gretta Vosper and Scott Kearns (c) 2005 West Hill United Church***

She does admit that the congregation did lose members, but feels that she and the congregation have a church service that is far more satisfying than before.

She and the Elders of the church are now considering the meaning and value of the word 'spiritual'!

Greta was an excellent speaker, and the following Q&A session was very spirited. The whole evening was filmed, and hopefully will be available soon. The PCN web site has a podcast of Gretta Vosper being interviewed on BBC Radio Oxford on September 28th 2014.

Brian Wardrop

Being Friends Together

In the New Year, Quaker Life and Woodbrooke are launching a learning/development programme for Local Meetings and Area Meetings. It will be widely promoted, and will provide many opportunities for Friends to explore aspects of our Quaker way. It will be important for all Friends who have an inclusive view of the Society of Friends to contribute in whatever way we can, to this programme. The programme itself seeks to be inclusive. Do take time to explore the website, and encourage your Local Meeting to join in order to access the materials.

It will cost £35 a year to join – and individuals can join if they wish. However you can view much of the material for free – the charge to cover the cost of the resource is chiefly for downloading materials. There is a mixture of videos to view, and printed material.

<http://together.woodbrooke.org.uk> a new resource for which 40 Friends in BYM are being trained to deliver. *(I was one of the first batch to attend a training session at York in October – Michael Wright)*

Being Friends Together offers Quaker meetings a fresh way of approaching their ongoing development as living communities of faithful people. It is packed with

- **activities** and ideas from previous Quaker learning projects
- some **newly written and recorded material**
- suggestions for useful **websites, courses and actions** that meetings can engage with

so we hope that there will be something here to suit every meeting's interests and preferences!

It also offers a simple discernment process to help meetings identify where they would like to focus their energy and attention first, supported by optional visits from experienced Friends or do-it-yourself guidance on the website.

Supporting You in Your Learning

Being Friends Together has been developed by Woodbrooke and Quaker Life to help Friends in meetings to:

- **develop spiritually**, both as individuals and meetings
 - learn about aspects of the **Quaker and Christian traditions**
 - develop and express their sense of **Quaker identity**
 - grow as **communities**
 - feel supported to live out **Quaker testimony** in their lives and localities
 - **integrate all generations** into the life of meetings
-

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