

Recent and current activities December 2016

Changing the narrative for peace – critical role of the media



Darlington Meeting House was the venue for Northern Friends Peace Board's conference on 24th September. Organised by the Board's 'Sustainable Security' project group, the event was attended by around 40 participants, speakers and committee members.

David Gee, our first speaker, presented participants with the challenge to 'rethink security', introducing a document of that title that he and others have published on behalf of the Ammerdown group.

Michael Gray, a young journalist from the even younger CommonSpace website and The National paper in Scotland, shared his experiences of working in a changed and changing political and social context. And Andrew Smith, the Media Coordinator at Campaign Against Arms Trade shared practical advice, from the value of brevity in catching attention, to being able to identify when, where and how news content can most effectively see the light of day. He explored the potential and dangers of new media and social media in shaping news, and encouraged us to be smarter and more responsive in how we engage.

The day continued with workshops, building on the themes of the speakers and giving participants an opportunity to dig deeper into some of the practicalities and context.

A fuller report and related material and links can be found on a new blog at

<https://peacetogethersite.wordpress.com/blog>

Inspiring speakers, important challenges

NFPB members met in early October and late November, in Penrith and York respectively. Common themes linked the two meetings, with a number of people joining us to speak and to explore current issues and challenges. Facing a continued drift towards increased militarism and military spending, alongside a political environment that is become more polarised and fearful, in the UK and beyond, Friends have been in a sombre but determined mood.

In October, Penrith Quaker *Ruth Harvey*, the newly appointed director of **Place for Hope**, gave an account of that project's work to support faith communities in dealing with conflict, as well as inviting us to explore our own feelings about conflict and particular areas of conflict arising from the EU referendum. Opening up differences, Ruth suggested, can lead to greater understanding. But before getting to that point, having an understanding of our own different approaches and attitudes to conflict was important.

Our second speaker was **Julie Ward**, one of the Labour Party's MEP's for North West England. Julie's passion and energy in using her time as an MEP to promote the causes of peace, justice and participation were striking. As well as outlining the opportunities for positive political engagement at the European level, she gave an account of her work on issues ranging from women's and children's rights, inter-cultural dialogue, Palestine and Israel, to nuclear disarmament and European responses to the needs of refugees.

At our November meeting in York, NFPB member and Edinburgh Friend Janet Fenton described the process that had led to the UN committing itself

to working towards a **global nuclear weapons ban treaty**. Through her involvement with the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, Janet had been able to attend key UN working group discussions and other sessions that prepared the ground for this decision, and she urged us to ask our government and MPs to play a constructive role in this unique multi-lateral disarmament initiative.

Michael Elstub of Settle Meeting was our second speaker in York, on the subject of **Veterans for Peace**. Michael's personal account of his journey was powerful and moving testimony; from becoming an army dentist (they helped pay his student fees), through long but uncomfortable service in the army to becoming an active Quaker and member of the UK branch of Veterans for Peace. VfP continue to grow in the UK and their members are keen to speak to groups to help give a fuller picture of life in the armed forces.

We ended our last session of the year in discussion and reflection, looking ahead and exploring priorities, opportunities and resources for our work. Insights and approaches to peace work that are rooted in our Quakerism should and can inform what we do. There are opportunities to speak out, to ask questions, but also to listen – meeting and talking with people who have very different perspectives as well as drawing support from our own community. NFPB is beginning the process of developing workshops for Friends and others on these themes.

EU Referendum

Northern Friends Peace Board, meeting on 18th June at Central Edinburgh Meeting House, produced the following statement, in the aftermath of the murder of MP Jo Cox and on the eve of the referendum on EU membership.

After the referendum, regardless of the outcome, there will be many people in the UK and elsewhere feeling hurt, angry and disappointed. The role of the media and many politicians in framing the debate has too often been very negative; passionate assertions have been presented as credible predictions, untruths have been used as if they were fact (in spite of frequent challenges), and fears and prejudices have been stoked up in support of competing agendas.

As Friends concerned for peace, we can unite in affirming the importance of equality, respect,

integrity in public life, and environmental sustainability as key foundations for peace. We can also affirm our commitment to internationalism and to cooperation between nations and peoples, the basis on which the EU was founded. Global challenges require responses at all levels, from local to international.

Cooperation is not always easy or straightforward, but in linking across cultures, national boundaries and languages, violent conflict is made less likely.

We know that, for these and other reasons, many Friends are committed to the European Union and to the UK staying within it. We also know that Friends have real concerns about the EU as an institution, and in particular by how it is shaped by the less positive influences of multinational trade. We aspire to a Europe whose security is based on mutuality and care for the marginalised and vulnerable, rather than on militarism and fear of the other.

Whatever the outcome, we as Quakers want and need to be ready to engage with our neighbours, in our communities, between nations and across Europe as a whole in challenging policies, practices and structures that work against the building of peace, and in promoting those which sustain and nurture it.

"Let us then try what love will do."

William Penn

Thank you

We close the year with some Friends finishing their service for NFPB; thank you to these Friends. And thank you to all those who have supported our work financially and in other ways. We look forward to meeting and working with and Friends, including new Area Meeting representatives, and others in 2017.

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