



Yearly Meeting of Quakers in France
October 2021, La Solitude, Bordeaux

Epistle

To Friends everywhere

French Quakers spent a joyful and inspirational week-end in the calm of the community of the Sisters of the Holy Family of Bordeaux, at their spiritual centre 'La Solitude', set in beautiful parkland surrounded by a sea of vineyards. We took as our challenge 'How to advance our aims and beliefs in such a needy world'. This sea of vineyards reminded us that France is the third exporter of wine in the world, but also the third exported of arms. We have work to do.

The Meeting was in both English and French, organised with great joy and energy by the newest of the groups in France - 'Nouvelle Aquitaine'. This group found that the times of Covid, requiring all encounters to be online, had in fact brought their geographically scattered community much closer together.

We listened to the story of Sophie Sturge, an English Quaker at the end of the 19th century, who when she learnt of the suffering of impoverished families in Ireland went to found a network of cottage industries in basket weaving to bring them a new means of living. « May action follow hard on the heels of conviction » was her motto.

The majority of French Quakers are committed to various local actions and larger charity organisations, and we don't have many actions under a Quaker banner, but the sharing of concerns between us brings renewed strength to our individual actions. When we fully commit to a work providence works with us.

The Meeting was shared by Friends on Zoom, which also allowed us to listen to two fine examples of our values in action. Terry Waite, well known for his work for reconciliation and peace, is a member of the Anglican Church as well as a Quaker (a 'Quanglican' he says), and a sometime president of EMAUS UK. He led several difficult and dangerous negotiations over the years for the freedom of political hostages and shared his learning of the importance of respecting the other, in whatever situation, and the essential of listening to understand an opponent. Hearing his story of surviving five years of solitary imprisonment was most inspiring. A witness to the vital place of faith and peace within, which then cannot be swayed by ones outer emotions or circumstances.

The second speaker, Bruce Kent, a one-time Catholic priest also gave witness of faith in action. He is well known for his stance against nuclear armaments and his work with CND (the

Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament), although seldom supported by his church. His personal engagement springs from both his deep moral conviction as well as his optimism for humanity – echoing the opening sentences of the United Nation charter. When we admitted a feeling of impotence when demonstrating against the entrenched ‘powers that be’, he laughed and replied “Wake up! And study history!” All great changes have been the fruit of a few who will not give up, that is what drives transition.

In various workshops some of our members presented their individual activities. The climate crisis has been driven by human activity and its now our personal imperative to limit energy consumption, change our habits, and not be shy to talk about this to neighbours turning a blind eye. Other Friends are members of Amnesty International and encourage our letter writing in support of the persecuted, and to keep the abuse of power in the public eye. There was witness to running a commercial enterprise on ecologically responsible methods. On this day of the opening of COP 26 in Glasgow we joined with an initiative of several other churches in a prayer of love for the earth, and that there maybe a real engagement to the necessary changes in society from our political leaders.

The Epilogue on Saturday evening gave a deeper reply to our question ‘How should we act ?’. George Fox has said “Walk in the light and you will shine”. Thus if we rest anchored in the Light within, we will always know what to do next.