**Hertford and Hitchin Area Meeting**

**Triennial Report October 2014 – September 2017 from Hertford Quaker Meeting**

Worshipping in *the oldest purpose-built Meeting House in* *the world to have been in continuous use* continues to present opportunities and challenges. The historical significance of the building attracts visitors throughout the year and especially on our open Saturday mornings during the summer and on Heritage Open Days. Visitors frequently see beyond the fabric of the building and are struck by the atmosphere created by over three hundred years of quiet prayer so that the building itself becomes a form of outreach. Being responsible for the care and upkeep of such a historic building brings its own challenges including the costs involved. In the winter the building becomes cold during the week and we feel the lack of any small, comfortable areas in which to meet. Consequently, most committees and study groups meet in Friends’ houses. We are aware of the irony of having a beautiful building which is unused most of the time.

Our pattern of worship has not changed since the last report. Our main Meeting for Worship is held at 10.30am each Sunday and is followed by a short period of ‘afterthoughts’. Sometimes our Meeting for Worship includes spoken ministry and sometimes it is held in silence. There is a Children’s Meeting on the third Sunday of each month and all-age worship is held approximately four times a year. The half hour, mid-week Quiet Time has been moved from Wednesday to Thursday. The number of regular attenders at Quiet Time is small but includes members of other churches and the occasional visitor. The number of people at the Sunday Meeting for Worship fluctuates between approximately 15 and 25. Advices and Queries are read during the preceding Meeting for Worship each time we have a Business Meeting. The average attendance at Business Meeting is 14. Several times a year we follow Meeting for Worship with a shared lunch, often followed by a topic for discussion. In recent times, we have considered: sustainability, afterthoughts, how we describe our meeting, what it means to be a Quaker today and ‘gifts’. Following the exercise on ‘gifts’ it was decided to hold a ‘seasonal’ Meeting for Worship on the Sunday before Christmas. This took the form of an all-age Meeting for Worship during which prepared ministry was offered in the form of words, music and art work. This has now become an annual event. During the past three years we have recorded the deaths of two Friends. We have also welcomed two Friends into Membership and heard with regret about the resignation of another Friend.

Like so many meetings we are engaged in looking at ways of involving as many people as possible in the active life of our community so that a few Friends don’t become overburdened with duties at both local and Area Meeting levels. We have some very involved attenders and avoid making a distinction between those in membership and those who have not yet taken that step when it comes to roles and responsibilities. Since 2015 we have chosen not to have named Elders and Overseers but to develop a system of shared responsibility for eldership and oversight. This system has both strengths and weaknesses and will be kept under review. We have a rota for Meeting Elder each Sunday and for a welcomer. The Meeting Elder invites someone else to sit by them and these roles have involved many Ffriends in upholding the worship and ensuring that everything runs smoothly. Every two months an Eldership and Oversight meeting is held which reports to the Business Meeting. These meetings are open to all but in reality, there is a core group of about ten Friends and attenders who attend regularly with others joining from time to time.

There are a number of regular groups which meet to support the spiritual and community life of the Meeting. Recently there have been two ‘Becoming Friends’ groups, one meeting during the day and the other in the evening. On the last Sunday of each month ‘Friendly Bible Study’ takes place after Meeting for Worship. An ‘Experiment with Light’ group meets monthly. ‘Give Peace a Year’ is a group that meets fortnightly, with the aim of providing a space in which to explore matters of personal peace. A Friend has initiated a regular tea party which we call ‘Get to Know your Ffriends’. ‘A small group has recently started to meet before Meeting for Worship on the first Sunday of each month to sing Taize chants.

Individually Hertford Quakers are active in the world in a range of ways. Several Friends are very involved in support for refugees and asylum seekers, especially the support of Syrian refugees through Herts Welcomes Syrian Families. Four families currently live in Ware. Another Friend has spent time in Lesbos and Calais and has organised days for the Meeting House to be open for donations. Friends were involved in sorting and labelling suitable donations to be taken to St Albans for Refugees. Just before the closure of the Calais camp Friends held a silent vigil in Hertford town centre to draw attention to the plight of the children. This was well reported by the local paper. In 2014 a group of Friends met regularly with knitting needles and pink wool taking part in ‘Wool Against Weapons’. The younger members of the Meeting are sponsoring a child in India through Plan UK and write to him regularly.

We continue to take an active part in Hertford and District Churches Together. In 2017, we were delighted to be the hosts for the Women’s World Day of Prayer annual service and to meet the challenge of holding programmed worship within a Quaker setting. It was the first visit to a Quaker Meeting House for many of the ‘congregation’ who told us how moving they found the service.

This report began with the challenges posed by our building, especially as we have no warden. Our lettings fluctuate but are currently healthy. However, managing lettings can be time consuming and we have recently started to pay a little extra money to our cleaner to manage the lettings in addition to her other duties. This is one of the roles that can be hard to fill on a voluntary basis as many younger Friends and attenders are involved in earning a living and most retired Friends live some way from the Meeting House and no longer want to take on such a time-consuming commitment. The wide range of organisations which hire the Quaker Room bring in much needed revenue, among them Gamblers Anonymous and local Moslems who use the Quaker Room for Friday prayers and Ramadan observance. Members of Hertford Music Club appreciate the very warm acoustic of the Meeting House during their monthly concerts. Since the last report two major improvements have been carried out. In 2016 the old Quaker Room ceiling was removed and a new ceiling and lights were installed. At the same time, a new accessible entrance from the street was built which has greatly improved the look of the Quaker Room from Railway Street. In 2017 the dangerous paving stones in the Meeting House courtyard were removed and replaced with a resin-bound gravel surface. The care and maintenance of our buildings and garden have been carried out in recent years by a very small group of dedicated Friends. We are currently looking at ways to increase the number of people who are willing to help out with routine garden and maintenance jobs so that individual Friends do not become overburdened. We are mindful that, recently, decisions about premises matters have led to conflict between Friends and Advices & Queries 17 has not always been heeded: ‘Listen patiently and seek the truth which other people’s opinions may contain for you. Avoid hurtful criticism and provocative language. Do you allow the strength of your convictions to betray you into making statements or allegations that are unfair or untrue? Think it possible that you may be mistaken’. We know that from time to time conflict occurs in most communities but we accept that it is less likely to occur if Quaker processes are faithfully followed. Those who continue to help us work through conflicts offer valuable service.

The words used at the end of our 2013 report remain apposite. We are optimistic and cheerful regarding our challenges. We must always be mindful that Friends and attenders come to Hertford Meeting seeking spiritual nourishment and support for their personal journey and this has to be balanced, but not outweighed, by responsibilities and demands for service to the Meeting.