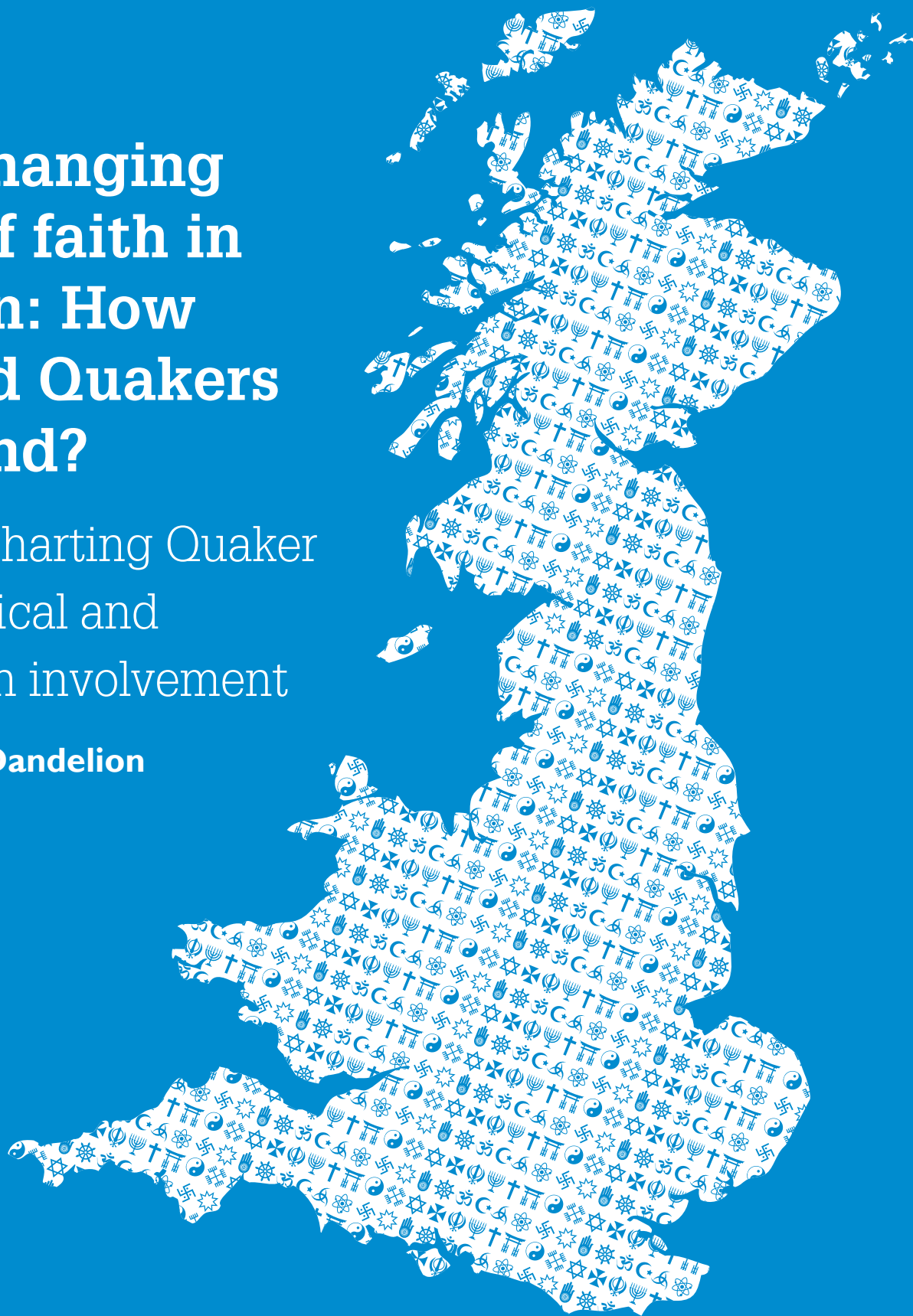


# The changing face of faith in Britain: How should Quakers respond?

Part 3: Charting Quaker ecumenical and interfaith involvement

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Britain Yearly Meeting  
and Woodbrooke  
working in partnership



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### Part 3: Charting Quaker ecumenical and interfaith involvement

#### Preface

The Quaker Committee for Christian & Interfaith Relations (QCCIR) is given the task of keeping Britain Yearly Meeting (BYM) informed of the various movements towards cooperation within the Christian church and opportunities for interfaith dialogue, and responds on their behalf to other Churches and faith communities (*Quaker faith & practice* 9.13). In the rapidly changing world in which we live, the religious landscape in which we operate is also continuously on the move. Becoming aware of this, QCCIR began to ask questions, such as:

- How do Quakers fit into this changing religious landscape in Britain?
- What are the implications for British Quakers?
- What does it mean for the work of QCCIR now and in the future? Do we need to consider changing how we work, what we do or who we work with?

These are big, open questions and QCCIR agreed to commission a piece of work that would help us along our way. An application to use legacy funding was successful and we commissioned the work from the Centre for Research in Quaker Studies (CRQS) at Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre. As can often be true of research projects, the answers we received are not necessarily those we expected. There is more work to be done, but the conversation has begun.

The brief given to CRQS was wide-ranging and complex. It encompassed an academic literature review, a survey of people new to Quakers to see what attracted them to the Society, a review of current contacts with religious or spiritual groups, and, finally, research on new faith and faith-based organisations in Britain with similar values to ours which QCCIR might wish to work with in the future. The timescale was tight, and further work may be commissioned to take parts of the brief further forward. The end result, entitled ‘The changing face of faith in Britain: How should Quakers respond?’, lends itself to division into various parts, each of which needs to be treated slightly differently.

In this third part, titled *Charting Quaker ecumenical and interfaith involvement*, QCCIR presents a research paper that offers an overview of existing involvement by local and area meetings, Quaker groups and staff at Friends House in ecumenical<sup>1</sup> and interfaith activities.

QCCIR trusts that this paper will be of interest to many in BYM.

<sup>1</sup> While ‘ecumenical’ technically refers to the whole people of God, it is used here in its popular British sense to refer to partnership between Christian denominations.

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#### Methodological note

To chart local Quaker involvement, an email request was sent to area meeting clerks currently subscribed to the area meeting clerks' cluster, to answer as area meetings and to pass on to local meeting clerks. A short deadline of two weeks was given, to maximise the response rate. There are 148 non-staff currently subscribed, but it is not known how many of the 70 area meetings are represented. Nevertheless, the response rate was good: 11 area meetings responded directly, and other clerks sent the request to local meetings; and 65 local meetings (about 13 per cent of the total) responded. In general, those who were actively involved in some area responded, although some did reply to say they were not involved at all. Meeting accounts have been anonymised except where specific instances have been used as case studies with the permission of the authors.

A similar email was sent to all Friends House staff via Marigold Bentley, Head of Peace Programmes and Faith Relations. The response was less strong, with just five staff replying. Some feedback included concern about how the data might be used and whether delicate and discreet partnerships might be highlighted unhelpfully in a potentially public document. Staff are obviously very busy and a fuller picture of all staff ecumenical and interfaith involvement might require guidance from the RCO rather than a request coming from an external researcher.

The contacts for 56 Quaker listed informal groups and 'registered bodies' were also emailed, and here the response varied, depending on the extent to which the topic had salience for the group. For example, the Quaker Universalist Group provided a long response, the Quaker Campers a predictably brief one. Ten groups responded, 18 per cent of the total.

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#### Charting existing connections

In 1989, London Yearly Meeting agreed to apply to join the new ecumenical bodies emerging from the Swanwick Declaration in 1987. The following year, it became a founding member of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (CTBI) and the national bodies Action of Churches Together in Scotland (ACTS), Cytûn (Churches Together in Wales) and Churches Together in England (CTE). Membership was via a special sub-clause 2b, which admitted the Religious Society of Friends as a non-credal church but one that manifests faith as witnessed to in the Scriptures. This membership was reviewed and affirmed by Britain Yearly Meeting in 1997. In the 1990s, QCCIR established that interfaith activity was as important as ecumenical activity and became a member of the Inter Faith Network for the UK (IFN).

A case study of British Quaker ecumenical involvement formed a chapter of *The Quakers: A very short introduction* (Dandelion, 2008), and the QCCIR publication *CIRcular* regularly reports local ecumenical and interfaith initiatives. A number of these were collected together as part of the Kindlers booklet on Quakers and interfaith work (Tucker and Ramamurthy, 2013). However, this report may represent the first systematic attempt to analyse Quaker ecumenical and interfaith activity.

#### Modes of engagement

There are five ways in which ecumenical and interfaith contact is understood and practised. The first is to promote friendship between different groups of believers. For example, one local meeting was a co-founder of an interfaith friendship group, which excluded clergy and officials and aimed simply to meet over meals to help enhance community. In another town, the Churches Together group organised a ‘conversation club’ along similar lines. Informal contact works in this vein, too, such as when a New Testament Church of God congregation moved into premises next to a Quaker meeting house, or a Meeting uses the local Congregational chapel for worship.

The second is to learn from each other – what the Quaker Douglas Steere termed “mutual irradiation” (1971). This might involve sessions sharing doctrine on particular topics, e.g. death or salvation. While the national ecumenical bodies have groups that carry on this work, it appears to be less common locally and is often short-lived, emphasising as it often does difference rather than commonality.

The third is to engage in joint work, such as helping refugees or setting up a food bank. This tends to focus on the witness and to downplay doctrinal differences. Meetings regularly reported joint work for refugees, or on fair-trade issues, or working with those from other churches in local Global Justice Now or Peace and Justice groups. Community care projects and shelters for the homeless were ecumenical activities listed by a number of Meetings.

We are actively supporting financially an initiative to buy and run a safe house for refugees in the urban conurbation. This is led by a multi-denominational group, and is supported by many local churches, and other Quaker Meetings.

Alongside this – fourth – is the practice of joint worship. Quakers have largely come to realise that silence is not a common denominator of interfaith or ecumenical worship but is its own distinctive liturgical form; but meeting houses, being unadorned, are often ideal locations for joint worship.

Fifth, and unusual amongst Quakers, is the use of ecumenism for mission (or, as one Catholic put it, ‘return’ – i.e. to the ‘mother church’ by members of churches that had

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broken away centuries ago). However, there is a constant tension between maintaining belief in the integrity and worth of one's own identity while being open to learning from and about those of different persuasions. British Quakers are particularly cautious about those groups that claim to have found the "final word", in contrast to the Quaker sense of the ever-onward journey of faith. In fact, it is sometimes easier for Quakers to engage with people of distinctly different faiths than with other Christians who maintain the same categories of belief but on different terms.

Initiatives such as the plan to lay a wreath of white poppies on Remembrance Sunday could be seen to demonstrate a desire to influence other groups, or at least assert Quaker identity.

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### Local meetings

#### Ecumenism

It is clear that there is a great deal of variety in local Quaker ecumenical and interfaith work, as encouraged by *Quaker faith & practice* 9.13–9.20, and that some Meetings are very heavily committed while others do little. Some Meetings reported doing nothing or feeling that their limited energies were being used up on internal needs or outreach.

In general, ecumenical work is more prevalent than interfaith liaison, encouraged by *Qf&p* 9.21, partly because there are more existing ecumenical structures, such as local Churches Together groups, that Quakers can join. From this research it appears that for some Meetings interfaith work happens via their local ecumenical structures.

The degree of local contact and partnership is often dependent on the enthusiasm of a few local Friends. Sometimes, most ecumenical work may be carried out by one devoted Quaker, operating outside of Meeting involvement. One Friend listed active ecumenical involvement with refugees and asylum seekers, a community land trust, a City of Sanctuary group, an asylum-seekers group and a ‘strategic migration partnership’, as well as taking part in a Churches Together tent at a national country show, all in a purely personal capacity, apart from any role in his local and area meeting.

Another responded:

I am a trustee of the... Faith and Community Forum and also community liaison officer for [the regional] Faiths Agency, so have contact with all the major faith groups in the area. I also attend the Muslim Sisters Circle monthly to have contact with the local Muslim women, and also Churches Together. I am also Quaker chaplain for the higher education college and [the local] university.

Some Meetings mentioned that the location of their meeting house placed them some distance away from other faith communities. In other cases, its location afforded opportunities: “Our meeting house is hired/used by other religious/spiritual/non-religious groups and is a popular, busy venue.”

#### Joint worship

The most common local Quaker ecumenical involvement is with Churches Together groups, with some Meetings aspiring to membership of their local group in the near future. These Churches Together groups often combine joint worship, discussion groups and shared witness. One Meeting wrote of their local group:

The main activities are two monthly meetings alternating between business and fellowship/worship (we take our turn in hosting these), fundraising for Christian Aid bread-and-cheese lunches in Lent (we host one of these), sponsored walk, sponsored swim (some Friends take part in these) and occasional midweek lunches with a speaker. One Friend serves on the ‘ministers’ fraternity’ and we are represented on the Christian Aid committee.

Sharing and leading worship also happen outside of formal structures. One Meeting is planning a programmed meeting to offer to those in full-time ministry.

One Meeting reported taking part in a



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fairly newly created church and community resource of [the local] Methodists. They hold a daily short service at lunchtime, adjacent to their vibrant and very popular café. Many denominations take it in turns to lead the service, and Quakers do this at least four times a year (all we can manage at the moment) when we have a short programmed meeting for worship.

Similarly: “One member has been invited to lead worship at one of the united services at a nearby village. These are Anglican/Methodist services and are arranged by the villagers.”

Another Meeting reported:

One member especially has much personal involvement in inter-church work in the town and coastal area around, including beach mission, Spring Harvest, the Deaf Church and the mobile House of God run around those villages with youth-centred activity. The bus has computers etc. and space to ‘be’ and to chat.

#### **CASE STUDY: Worksop**

We are a small meeting, 12 members and attenders (two of whom have severe mobility issues, and cannot often attend meeting). We meet on two Sundays and one Thursday evening each month, in a room at the local Methodist/URC church – and so have regular contact with church members there, which has included (for example) taking part in their ‘Church Café’ (Sunday evening) session.

Also:

- We have had some involvement in the Bassetlaw Christian Heritage Network, which was set up to commemorate the Mayflower Pilgrims, which will lead up to the 2020 Illuminate events in Plymouth UK, Plymouth New England, Bassetlaw and Holland (prominent pilgrim leaders came from the north Notts area). The Network has been set up with the wider brief [of] celebrating and documenting Christian heritage in the area. It’s quite an exciting project, I feel, but, as with so many things, needs more time commitment, which is not easy.
- A representative from our meeting has been invited to take part in, and has attended, the Church in Community group, set up by John Mann, our local MP, to enable him and the leader of the local council to communicate with church leaders.
- Three of the Meeting attended Poplars – a local evangelical church that started life as a house church, I believe – to see what it was like and to introduce themselves.
- Following a local newspaper article, Friends wish to discuss a possible meeting with local Muslims, who have opened a Muslim prayer centre in the town.
- One Quaker attends the monthly Cameo (‘Come and meet each other’) group at The Crossing, which involves a short service and lunch. People from many different churches attend and it is designed for people who live alone.

#### **Joint witness**

Witness often occurs through Churches Together groups.



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#### **CASE STUDY: Hexham**

The main focus for Quakers has always been a 'peace vigil' on the Saturday morning before Remembrance Sunday. The main part of this event lasts for two hours from 10am and the format is of silence but with short readings or other contributions of approximately five minutes, at 15- or 20-minute intervals. This was initially under the auspices of Churches Together in Hexham and with contributions from members of the churches, including Quakers, of course.

A number of years ago we felt that the spoken content should be interfaith and encompass secular organisations, too. That was just a bit too much for several of our more evangelical churches and the event has since continued as a Quaker event, albeit with the enthusiastic participation of a significant number of lay people from other churches. The advantage of this is that we are not restricted in who we invite to speak and since then we have heard from Muslims, Sikhs, Baha'is, Buddhists, Jews, Humanists... and others.

This event has been held since its inception in one of the churches or the Catholic church hall. For the last two years it has been held in Hexham Abbey itself and has incorporated a short period at the end for impromptu contributions from anyone attending, in the manner of Quakers. The final step for quite a number of years has been for any participants who so wish to join with the laying of a wreath of white poppies at the Cenotaph in the centre of Hexham, with a short period of silence.

A few thoughts now on poppies and white poppy wreaths: there's not much love lost between the Peace Pledge Union (PPU), supplying white poppies, and the British Legion and their red poppies. The British Legion are concerned with remembrance and providing support only to British soldiers and their families and even receive funding from several arms companies. Some would say they encourage the present acceptability of war as a means of resolving disputes between nations. The PPU on the other hand are very much in line with Quakers' ideals in challenging values that see war as inevitable, and money raised goes to education to encourage young people particularly to consider other possibilities. The white poppy is a symbol of our inability to settle conflicts without resorting to killing but, more importantly, of hope and commitment to work for a world where conflicts will be resolved without violence but with justice.

So, we have never attempted, or wished, to get involved in the main 'red poppy' event at the cenotaph in Hexham on Remembrance Sunday, but have obtained permission from the town council to lay our white poppy wreath on the Saturday, which hasn't been a problem. Important to mention that our white wreath with 50 white poppies also contains four red ones, one at each cardinal point. Perhaps because of this, the wreath has always remained with all the others throughout the winter months with its inscription:

In loving remembrance of all the members of the armed forces and non-combatants who have given their lives in times of war, those who have witnessed for an end to war by their refusal to bear arms, and the numberless civilian victims of wars past and present throughout the world.

'They shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more' (Isaiah 2:4).

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#### Other Meetings reported:

We are involved in Churches Together. It is mostly an information and small financial contribution involvement... We help support a youth worker from Young Life International ([www.ylinternational.org/content.php?node=home](http://www.ylinternational.org/content.php?node=home)), and in the last two years they have camped overnight with about 15 youngsters in the meeting house.

We are very much involved with the local Christian Aid group. Two of our members are on the committee and we regularly hold fundraising events at the meeting house which lots of people from all the churches come to.

One reported: "Several Friends are working as Street Pastors." Another said: "Green Christians is another group we have collected for in our Meeting."

#### **CASE STUDY: Monkseaton**

To put it in context, we are a smallish (c.15 members, some attenders and a couple of children) [local Meeting], within an established suburban area on the north-east coast. We generally have about 12–15 worshippers at Sunday morning meeting.

Throughout our 100-year history we have always worked closely within our town with other Christian denominations and other faith groups (where they exist).

We are active members of the Whitley Bay and District Churches Acting Together group, as we have been of its precursor bodies, such as the local Free Church Council and local Whitley Bay and District Council of Christian Churches. Through these groups we have a long history of welfare work in our area, especially with the (young) homeless, and also contribute to the Bay Foodbank (which was set up most recently by the Bay Church, a 'new' church, although the distribution of food to the economically needy has a very long history in this area). The WB & DCATG also supports a charity called 'Walking With' that works with the Syrian refugee families placed in this borough (Monkseaton Quaker Meeting contributes toiletries). One of our members holds one of the free-church places on the ecumenical North Tyneside Council Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education (SACRE), on which are represented members of other Christian churches and other faiths in accordance with the provisions for religious education in state schools of the 1988 Education Act, to advise on the curriculum of religious education in secular state schools.

Other ecumenical activities Monkseaton Friends are involved in include volunteering with the multifaith chaplaincy of our local NHS trust; participation in the annual St Nicholas Festival in Whitley Bay; support for the De Paul Trust (established originally as a Catholic charity); and support for the government's cold weather sleeping initiatives, contracted by the council to the local churches resource centre established by the Methodists.

Witness also takes place through other local Christian and interfaith networks: "We have a member and attender closely in touch with the International Care Network, which offers practical and emotional support to refugees, largely, at the moment, from Syria."

Or, again:

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We are actively supporting financially an initiative to buy and run a safe house for refugees in the urban conurbation. This is led by a multi-denominational group, and is supported by many local churches, and other Quaker Meetings.

Similarly, one Meeting reported: “The Meeting supports with donations the work of the Anglican-led drop-in club in the next village for people seeking guidance on finding employment and just wanting a chat and a cup of tea.”

#### **CASE STUDY: South Manchester**

I'm the local Meeting rep on the Jonah Group, which is a network of Christian churches in Wythenshawe, a huge council estate with all the attendant problems. The people who attend our Meeting come from various parts of South Manchester, and I'm one of the few who actually live in the Wythenshawe constituency. I was 'in at the start' of the group and expressed my hope that it would be an interfaith group, but the other participants felt it was important to first establish links between the Christian churches. This has worked well. The meetings are mainly attended by ministers and lay workers from the Anglican, Methodist, Roman Catholic and United Reformed churches, the Wythenshawe Hospital and Manchester Airport chaplaincies and myself. Attempts to involve other churches have had some degree of success. I've been warmly welcomed and respected for my Quaker way of looking at things. We all share a deep concern for social justice in particular. As well as meeting and cooperating on projects, we share information by email – e.g. I've just asked for a leaflet about the interfaith week of prayer for world peace to be circulated, and I'm going to send an invitation to join our vigil on the steps of Mount Street Meeting House in October at the time of the Conservative Party conference.

I've given two reports to local meeting. The first is about the setting-up of the group and the second about the food bank situation. I now take our Meeting's food bank donation to St Aidan's RC church, where I often enjoy a cup of tea and a chat with the people attending the Wednesday lunch club, which doubles as a food bank access point.

A valuable aspect of the group is that we have a good relationship with Mike Kane, the (Labour) MP for Wythenshawe and Sale East. He joins us for a breakfast meeting a couple of times a year and has attended a couple of our Forum meetings as well.

There's a new Jonah Group website, which is very much in its infancy:

[wythenshawechurches.weebly.com/wythenshawe-community-church.html](http://wythenshawechurches.weebly.com/wythenshawe-community-church.html)

There's more information and pictures on Facebook:

[en-gb.facebook.com/JonahGroupWythenshawe](https://en-gb.facebook.com/JonahGroupWythenshawe)

Chaplaincy is another common area of joint work, in both university and hospital settings. This transcends Christian ecumenism.

One city-centre Meeting has sponsored an interfaith Mission in the Economy (MitE) via a reduced-lease agreement. There are four paid chaplains and some 12 volunteer chaplains who are a visible presence in the city and the larger community of businesses, airports and market centres. In the autumn, a 'faith fair' will be held in the city centre, at which the Meeting will have a stall.

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This response was typical of Meetings involved in university chaplaincy work: “The university chaplaincy team presently has representatives from all the major faith traditions, as well as pagan and humanist members.”

On hospital chaplaincy: “There is a long-standing, active and successful chaplaincy in our local large general hospital. It is currently led by a Catholic priest, with a number of other denominations and faiths, and includes our two Quaker chaplains.”

#### Mutual learning

##### **CASE STUDY: Lampeter**

We have a fairly loose link with churches locally but a shared list of email addresses which we use to circulate information of mutual interest, such as talks or church celebrations. There is, or was, a Cytûn/Churches Together monthly discussion evening which several Quakers used to attend along with people of most of the other local churches, but it seems to have dwindled.

There are two evangelical church groups in Lampeter and they are part of this communication channel, and on some matters they take a full and active part and on others not. However, the thing which joins us together is the Lampeter Food Bank which is run under the auspices of churches in Lampeter. Both evangelical churches take active roles, as do the Catholics and several Quakers.

The other way we have worked with other churches is for funerals of Friends who either had strong links with another church... or their family did. We have a member who is also an Anglican vicar, so he naturally brings other perspectives to us and Quaker viewpoints to the churches where he works.

We attract people from a wide radius and several of our members have links with the churches in their local communities, including attending regularly.

Here in Wales our links are generally channelled through [meeting for worship], rather than the area meetings, which do not span natural geographical or administrative areas. So, in Cytûn... some of the newer churches [have] recently joined the more established ecumenical partners, as well as churches which have sprung up [among] those who have come to Wales as asylum seekers or by forced migration, such as the Ethiopian Orthodox church. Cytûn works alongside the Evangelical Alliance on issues of public concern relating to the Welsh government, keeping in touch and agreeing to differ, whether between EA and Cytûn or between different denominations.

Some of us may use area meeting channels to spread information about opportunities and activities to work alongside other churches, which are many and numerous, especially in the larger cities such as Cardiff.

On interfaith work... Cytûn acts as the conduit for formal interfaith dialogue in Wales. Locally, we have made efforts to work with those of other faiths in Lampeter, especially around human rights issues, in the past and have attended some events hosted at the university, which has significant involvement through its theology department.

*A fuller picture of ecumenical and interfaith life in Wales appears in the Appendix on p. 33.*

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### Outreach

This kind of involvement was often prompted by other churches. For example: “The small Meeting of three active Friends has been invited to give a talk about Quakers to the evangelical church group Stand by Me. One of the attenders here is a member of this organisation.”

Another example was more proactive:

I represent Friends on the local ministers' fraternal. I've introduced the idea of listening as part of Christian ministry and the fraternal have decided to make listening to God the theme of their Lent course in 2018. I will lead one of the sessions – the content will probably be based on the workshops at Yearly Meeting Gathering this year.

This mode of engagement was the most rare.

### Friendship

Sometimes, friendship was the sole aim of an ecumenical initiative, but at other times it became an implicit consequence of joint work:

I am currently our [local Meeting]'s rep on [the local] Churches Together committee, and I'm finding it a very agreeable engagement. The differences between us theologically (others seem to see God as micro-managing events and lives to a degree I can't share) are offset by the very obvious goodwill which all of us bring to our tasks and the openness with which we apparently interact. It has also been a useful forum currently through which to bring to a wider constituency our plans for Quaker Week. Our programme has, for instance, gone out with the minutes of our most recent meeting, reaching the local community centre, where it has been further widely publicised. I am pleased therefore to get to know what activities other groups are engaged on or planning – also to raise some awareness of our own.

### Maintaining integrity

A few Meetings spoke of tensions in their ecumenical work. For example:

We had a long-standing contact with Churches Together... We were only allowed to observe and I believe it was not without tensions. The person who took this role stopped a little while ago and we are looking to start again.

Again: “It took many years for us to be accepted as we don't recognise the Trinity. We take it [in turns] to hold an ecumenical breakfast, attend joint talks given by different churches... and our paths regularly cross with other members in local churches.”

Dogmatic doctrinal conditions for joint work seem rarer than they were 20 years ago, but they still exist in some places:

There is a Churches Together... but we are unable to belong to it as we can't sign up to their very narrow interpretation of Christianity. You literally have to sign up to a set of formal beliefs based on Jesus' sacrificial atonement and Jesus as the only route to God. It is dominated by fundamentalist groups and theology. When we asked them to advertise our fundraising event for Christian Aid they refused, because we are not signed-up members. So, a rather rigid and exclusive group!

Other Meetings mentioned that their local Churches Together group was too “evangelical”

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in tone for Quaker tastes. Nobody cited the exclusion of Unitarians from the national ecumenical bodies as a reason not to be more involved, although three Meetings reported working particularly closely with Unitarians:

We have supported several causes brought to our attention by our Unitarian friends... For example, we have supported collections to help Syrian refugees. We often invite the Unitarians to join us during special events such as fair-trade tea parties or the recent performance of *The Bundle*, and Friends support special events...

Similarly:

We send a representative to meetings of the local Churches Together group. This doesn't really seem to result in very much tangible contact or common action, though... More concrete is our friendly relationship with the local Unitarians, with whom we feel we have a lot more in common in terms of our faith and whose church happens to be just a few doors from our own. They generally come to us when they need to borrow additional tables or chairs and they have recently been using our meeting house for their services while their church was being refurbished. They have invited us to participate in their 150th anniversary celebrations next week as it happens, just as a couple of years ago we invited them to the 150th anniversary of the opening of our own meeting house.

Again: "I have arranged shared worship with the Unitarians at our meeting house, and we Quakers have shared a joint worship with the Unitarians at their own place of worship. We hope to arrange another in the near future as these have been very happy occasions."

#### **CASE STUDY: Chesham**

Chesham Quakers were founder members of the Chesham Fellowship of Churches (CFC) in 1970 and of its successor, Churches Together for Chesham (CTfC), in 1995. (CTfC was formed by a merger of CFC and of an 'inner-circle' Chesham Local Ecumenical Council, which had been formed later by some of its member churches.) One of our members has had a year as president of the old CFC and another year as chair of CTfC early in its life. However, upholding ecumenical cooperation in Chesham has been hard work, and its structures are complicated. On 6 May 2012, after receiving a report on some of the complications, we minuted our prayerful support for our representative on CTfC, who was also (at that time) a trustee of the Chesham Ecumenical Association, which provides its charitable status.

We are conscious of a special responsibility to sustain a distinctive non-doctrinaire Christian tradition, as the few churches in which that strand is still represented are increasingly at risk of being submerged under the evangelical tide which is very strong in Chesham and has little time for other Christian traditions. Ecumenical work remains difficult (as we have noted in successive triennial reports) because of the religious complexion of the town.

Nevertheless, we have been able to join in two particular interchurch activities, where Quaker involvement is long established. One is the midweek Rendezvous service, held in



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Chesham United Reformed Church under CTfC auspices, which it is our turn to lead several times a year. (Anglican, Baptist, King's Church, Methodist, RC and URC are the other churches taking turns to lead, the Salvation Army having sadly had to close down its 117-year presence in Chesham in 2015.) Great care goes into the preparation of half-hour services which will speak to the condition of the regular Rendezvous worshippers (who come from different churches and none) while remaining faithful to Quaker inspiration. We find the effort worthwhile, as what we offer is generally appreciated by the mainly non-Quaker congregation.

The other is the Women's World Day of Prayer (WWDP), prepared each year by a different country. Every year, we host a Bible study evening at Chesham Meeting House for the local WWDP committee, as well as taking part in the WWDP service itself, which is the culmination of the Bible study and other preparations. The local WWDP committee is currently co-chaired by another of our members.

We greatly value our participation in Rendezvous and WWDP and feel at ease with these ecumenical activities, firmly Christian but non-doctrinaire.

Other interchurch activities in Chesham these days are too evangelical for us and/or use styles of worship and praise with which we are not comfortable. They represent a narrow level of churchmanship which ignores the broad sweep of the ecumenical movement as it developed, with active Quaker participation, in the twentieth century.

And now in 2017 CTfC is in transition – unnecessarily, in the view of our representative – to a new constitution. It would worry us if it ended up requiring adherence to a more narrowly evangelical statement of faith: something we had to resist in the 1980s and again when the merger to form CTfC was being negotiated in 1994. At the same time, the more liberal element among the clergy of Chesham\* has almost disappeared, [through] the retirement of one and relocation of another, so we are even shorter of allies in CTfC than we were before.

\* From our triennial report to Chilterns Area Quaker Meeting, 30 June 2013:

"We minuted on 11 December 2011 that we think our role as a Meeting should be 'to concentrate on Chesham and our local community, and to try to meet the needs of Chesham people, for example through our participation in Rendezvous with openness to different points of view in an interchurch context without imposing doctrinal uniformity'. A striking – and unexpected – instance of our usefulness in this regard had arisen when Symon Hill [at that time a director of the Christian think-tank Ekklesia, and news reporter for *The Friend*; now coordinator for the Peace Pledge Union] was on his 15-day, 160-mile 'pilgrimage of repentance' from Birmingham to London and was coming to Chesham as one of his overnight stops. We made the meeting house available to the ministers of Trinity Baptist Church and the United Reformed Church when they asked us; this enabled them to host an evening meeting for Symon, when a request to use their own church halls would have been divisive within their congregations because his subject was homophobia and the churches. The meeting on 28 June 2011 was attended by members of six different churches, who were able to listen to Symon describe his own journey of understanding away from the homophobic attitudes found in some of the churches he had joined since becoming a Christian, and why he felt called to this public witness. His unassuming frankness encouraged supportive questions. This was an unusual occasion but we were



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glad to be able literally to accommodate our Baptist, URC and Anglican friends.”

We were able to report something similar in our next triennial report to CAQM, 17 January 2016:

“By hosting Bruce Kent during his ‘No Faith in Trident’ speaking tour of churches and faith communities, advocating nuclear disarmament... The Bruce Kent meeting brought in people of other churches and none. It was chaired by a Baptist minister whose own church would have found the subject too political.”

#### Summary

The following two extracts typify local Meeting responses where ecumenical involvement is an integral part of Meeting life.

We are very much involved in Churches Together. Jointly, we run the local food bank and hold a joint Celebration of Christmas and Harvest Supper. We have also been involved together in helping a Syrian refugee family which has been settled locally. Quaker representatives attend special services at other churches, and many of those involved from the other churches attend open events at the Quaker meeting house. We contribute a Thought for the Month on a rotational basis to the local village magazine, along with other churches. One of our members helps at the Free Church café, which is free to all.

A Friend is secretary to the Forum. The clerk meets informally periodically with clergy in the town and other ‘team leaders’. We work with members of other churches to plan activities during Lent which raise funds for Christian Aid, and also participate in Lent house groups. This year we hosted the Women’s World Day of Prayer service at the meeting house. Friends have been involved in the setting up of the food bank. We have invited members of other churches to join with us for a peace walk and silent vigil as well as collection of clothes etc. for refugees. We let our premises for Muslim Friday prayers and Ramadan observance, but there is no other formal connection because they are not organised as a collective body. However, individual relationships have been formed and they participated in the collection of goods for Calais.

We can see here a mix of at least four kinds of engagement: friendship and collegiality, shared worship, shared witness, and mutual learning. Interfaith work is often a part of this ecumenical involvement.

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### Interfaith

Interfaith work typically revolves around mutual learning, including the education of the wider community, and witness work.

#### **CASE STUDY: Herefordshire**

The initial meeting of Herefordshire Inter-faith Group (HIFG) was in December 2014 at the Bishop's Palace. The following faiths were represented: Buddhist, Jews, Christian Science, Church of England, Islam, Society of Friends. Other participants were SACRE, Herefordshire Council, the police. A supporting letter was sent from Bishop [Richard] Frith.

There was much goodwill at this first meeting and a statement of intent was formulated:

“The purpose of HIFG is to create an environment for all Faiths in Herefordshire to develop a united presence through peace and understanding. To meet and learn from one another, to recognise each other's faith through art, culture, education and friendship. To build a friendship built on understanding, based on mutual trust and respect as we appreciate the spiritual, moral, social and cultural diversity, of each member faith.”

Unfortunately, because of illness and some members [being] unable to take up their roles within the group, HIFG did not have another meeting until mid 2015. The initial aim was to have regular monthly meetings, but it was not feasible as people were too busy. A steering group was set up which included Buddhist, Baha'i, Anglican, Christian Science, Quaker [representatives as well as] Neville Meredith (Herefordshire Council) and a police representative. The group struggled with its organisational structures, a constitution, the question of membership fees and general administration.

However, some impressive events have taken place, which have been amazing and humbling. There have been two services in 2015 and 2016 in the cathedral to celebrate the International Day of Peace. The Quakers participated, offering their peace testimony in 2015 and in 2016 extracts from 'African Voices for Peace' were used, with examples of conflict resolution and reconciliation. [The 'African Voices' exhibition came to Hereford Cathedral for the week of prayer for Christian unity in January 2017, and later an extract was used with visual accompaniment for a special Pentecost service for the Hereford Diocese in the cathedral, with kind permission from Friends House.] Other participating faiths were Buddhists, Baha'i, Christian Science, Hindus, Jews, Anglicans, and Muslims. A Muslim sung a 'qira'at' (selected verses from the Quran). This single voice was both haunting and immensely spiritual. The contributions offered by each faith gave us all a rich and colourful experience in prayer, in sound and sincerity. Both peace services were well attended, with people coming from as far as Evesham, Pershore, Redditch, and Bromsgrove. The next peace service will be in September 2018.

A meditation day at Almeley Meeting House was very successful and fully booked, and another one is arranged at the Methodist Hall in Leominster on 25 November 2017. For International Women's Day a craft and meditation event was held for women. Again, this was successful, although numbers were small. The aim was to encourage women who would not normally be allowed to participate in a mixed-gender event.

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There has been a visit to a Gloucester mosque, where visitors were warmly welcomed and learnt about how the youth attended Quranic school to learn the Quran by heart. Zack Pandor, HIFG treasurer and our key Muslim contact, arranged the visit (Zack has also given a Millichap Lecture, an annual lecture on peace). St Michael's Hospice showed an interest in HIFG and asked if we could offer a 'Light up a Life' service. This took place in the Hereford Meeting House in December 2016. Another is planned for 7 December 2017 2–4pm at the Meeting House.

Civil bodies such as the council and the police have shown an interest [in] and support for HIFG, with particular concern for migrants, refugees and combating racial and religious prejudice.

There are occasional coffee mornings, to help people be aware of HIFG and to raise funds. The next one is at Forbury Chapel, Leominster Friday 17 November 10–12 noon. Fundraising is still an unsettled question. A membership subscription has been considered but not implemented.

It is interesting to note that Quaker meeting houses have been seen as appropriate places to welcome people of all faiths, and hopefully such people have felt equally comfortable within such locations.

Information on HIFG can be found on our Facebook page and the website:

[www.facebook.com/Herefordshireinterfaith](https://www.facebook.com/Herefordshireinterfaith)

[www.herefordshireinterfaith.org.uk](http://www.herefordshireinterfaith.org.uk)

Some Meetings have their own interfaith groups:

This meets every month or so and is open to members of the Meeting (four or so regular members) and (usually) to members of other faiths. We have visited other faiths (e.g. a Shia mosque and a Reform synagogue). There is a Baha'i who comes regularly, sometimes a Buddhist. At Passover we helped arrange a seder meal at the meeting house, attended by local Jews and Friends.

Similarly:

The Meeting Interfaith Group meets together monthly to consider business items, plan monthly meetings to which the public are invited, talks to children in local schools and occasional social events for members and friends: a great occasion to get to know each other, and to learn about others' faiths. There are a few Friends who regularly attend [Interfaith Forum] meetings, though not as many as one might wish. Quaker interests are very diverse and not all will be able to go to IF activities as well as the other matters which take up their time. I do try to make sure that Friends are kept informed and put articles in our Quaker newsletter.

Local interfaith networks help sustain involvement:

At local meeting level, we are involved with the Interfaith Forum, which meets monthly. There are representatives at the Forum from Friends, Anglicans, Methodists, Muslims,

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Evangelicals, Pagans and Humanists. Some call themselves “liberal Christians”. There are two of us who attend regularly and another two who attend from time to time.

Again: “Our local Interfaith Forum, which is supported by a number of Quakers, organises an annual peace walk typically linking Christian, Muslim, Hindu, and Sikh faiths and places of worship and holds regular monthly discussions, supplemented by occasional public lectures.”

Local ‘faith forums’ may focus on common issues such as anti-extremism and community safety, or in one case a faith-community-led refugee settlement programme: “Our main interfaith involvement at the moment is with a refugee sponsorship project in which we are participating as a meeting, along with two local mosques and one Salvation Army group.” One Meeting reported: “Our local faith and communities police officer has taken to worshipping with us recently. He does the rounds – interesting that our police forces pay him to do that.”

In three cases, Meetings spoke of offering space for those of other faiths to worship:

We have also agreed to host our local Reform synagogue when they move out of their current building as part of a redevelopment of the city centre. This will involve them worshipping in the meeting house over an extended period of time.

A local Muslim offshoot... has hired [our meeting house] on a weekly basis for a few years now, for worship. About 100 attend.

Quakers as a whole give meeting house space to our local Muslim community for Friday prayers and we have had several valuable exchanges as a result – e.g. Quakers and others were invited to attend a prayer session and several Muslims came to a film about Christian and Muslim women working together to bring an end to the Liberian civil war.

More than one meeting reported interfaith friendship groups as successful. One was part of an ‘interface forum’ (“an informal group of people interested in interfaith. It exists to promote understanding and friendship among people of all faiths and none”).

Some Meetings mixed informal approaches with mutual learning:

We have a very lively interfaith group, hosted by Quakers at the meeting house, yet supported by just two. It was started in the 1980s and consists of most faith groups. We are a larger group than our Quaker Meeting... and have informal discussions on all manner of subjects – sadly too informal for most Quakers! It’s a very good way to understand different faiths by sharing in a positive, caring environment.

Several of us went to the local mosque open day last Sunday, and we are investigating setting up a ‘women’s conversation club’ to get to know each other – in the interests of easing prejudice and splits etc.

Community cohesion is often a prompt for these friendship groups, while in some areas, such as Newbury ([www.facebook.com/PiForum](http://www.facebook.com/PiForum)), there are specific groups set up to enhance community integration.

Local councils sometimes support interfaith groups:

The interfaith working group is hosted by the borough council and open to

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representatives of all local faith groups. At the last meeting (attended by ministers from several churches, including Street Pastors, and a Sikh rep, a Jewish rep, a Hindu rep, a Humanist rep and a Muslim rep), which was given over to meeting the new CEO for the borough council, we were encouraged to ask her questions after her brief introductory talk.

#### **CASE STUDY: Kettering**

We have been represented on Kettering Churches Together for some years. About two years ago, the borough council formed the Kettering Inter-faith Forum... To begin with, it was little more than the different faiths coming together to discuss how we could improve interfaith relationships and understanding. In 2016 we held an interfaith café at the meeting house on a Saturday morning and had about 20 people attend from four different faith groups. This was expanded to an afternoon of music and art as part of KetFest (Kettering Art Festival) in June 2017, with each faith exhibiting information about their faith as well as spending time with each other. In return, we were invited to the mosque for the feast at the end of Ramadan (Iftari) and will be going to join the Baha'is for the celebration of the 200th anniversary of the birth of their founder. As a forum we have

- arranged other open-door events with places of worship open for visits by people of different faiths
- met with representatives of the police and borough council, and representatives of the forum met with the Lord Lieutenant
- issued joint statements following terrorist atrocities.

There is now a regular interfaith café on the last Thursday of each month.

We are planning events for Inter Faith Week in November, which I hope will include a meeting for worship, open to all.

As with ecumenical involvement, individual enthusiasm often drives corporate interest:

In addition, a number of us are individually interested in Buddhist, and particularly Zen and non-dualist, teachings. We read a lot and share with each other on an informal basis and sometimes go to silent retreats, which we value enormously. We also have a Quaker in our meeting who goes to Tibetan Buddhist meetings occasionally, a t'ai chi teacher who is open to Taoism and other non-dualist teachings, people open to Thich Nhat Hanh's teachings, a regular attender who goes to a Gurdjieff group as well as coming weekly to meeting for worship and another attender from a Christian Spiritualist background which still means a lot to him and deepens his ministry enormously.

Interfaith work can also arise organically:

There is an active interfaith group within the meeting and we have several Quanglicans [the term refers to those who are both Quaker and Anglican] and/or Quakers with partners of other faiths or none and quite a lot of crossover contact and liaising on projects as a result, e.g. our outreach group organised a showing of the Quaker exhibition 'This Light that Pushes Me' in the local cathedral.

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Another example:

I'm a senior Friend who happens to live 150 yards from the London Fatwa Council's address... From me they already have a copy of *Advices & queries* and an introductory letter from [our] area meeting outreach committee, but as of today's date no reaction has been received, though on the one occasion when I found the door open and a welcoming (all male) presence, all was on the friendliest of terms. One of their principal activities is to assist Muslim women, especially wives who have marriage problems and desire a Muslim solution, so it's possible they are busy. The address also serves as a mosque, often with a mat in the form of a loose piece of paper on the floor requesting (in English) visitors to remove their shoes.

#### **CASE STUDY: Wimborne**

Wimborne [Quaker] Meeting has fostered mutual links and inter-visited for deep discussion with Bournemouth Islamic Centre and Central Mosque over the past year, seeking as we do to be in supportive connectedness with Muslims. We also have links with International Care Network, which seeks to support refugees and asylum seekers locally. Following Yearly Meeting 2017, as a continuing commitment of welcome, Wimborne Meeting has become a Sanctuary Meeting.

It is common that interfaith networks are open to any interested individuals while ecumenical ones mostly tend to seek representatives.

In summary, local meetings are highly engaged both ecumenically and in interfaith work, often enthused by individual members and sometimes inheriting the connections that particular Quakers have made personally. The local nature of this cooperation creates friendships and partnerships, which energises the joint work and means that it is more than a structural liaison. All the modes of engagement are in operation here, more so in ecumenical work than in interfaith work. Tensions over doctrine or focus seem to be rare.

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### Area meetings

#### Ecumenism

Area meetings are less involved ecumenically because many of the structures operate at a more local level. However, many area meetings were able to appoint representatives to regional Churches Together groupings and SACREs (Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education) which operate at a county level. Sometimes it is the area meeting that appoints to university chaplaincies.

#### **CASE STUDY: Bournemouth Coastal Area and Dorset**

About 18 months ago, I was appointed ecumenical representative for Bournemouth Coastal Area Meeting. I got to know Catholic, C of E, Baptist, Methodist, Salvation Army, etc. [representatives] and soon got involved in joint events and projects. I collate all the information sent by others and regularly write it up for our newsletter. Examples are Taizé services, dementia-friendly services, Christian meditation and ecumenical prayer meetings. As a Meeting, we also help with the annual Christian Aid Lent lunches.

A few months ago, I was appointed area representative for Churches Together in Dorset. I have since attended three meetings and helped organise the first event, which is to be a quiet day at Holton Lee near Poole. This strikes me as a very 'Quakerly' event, but planned jointly with everyone else, of course. I have delivered one report to the area meeting so far.

#### **CASE STUDY: Northumbria**

We are, as an area meeting, a member of Tyne & Wear Citizens. This means that we are working to diagnose and aim to treat some of the ills which are affecting our citizens. This network of organisations includes Northumbria Area Quakers, the Anglican Durham diocese/Communities Together Durham, the Anglican Newcastle diocese/Together Newcastle, Hexham and Newcastle RC diocese Justice & Peace Network, the Islamic Diversity Centre – North East, Newcastle Central Mosque and St Thomas More Academy.

We are represented on:

- North East Churches Acting Together (NECAT)
- Northumbria University chaplaincy advisory group
- Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education (SACRE) – joint appointment with Teesdale & Cleveland [Area Quaker Meeting]
- SACRE in Newcastle
- Quaker Committee for Christian & Interfaith Relations (QCCIR) – correspondent



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### Interfaith

Area meeting involvement in interfaith work is often carried by committed individuals rather than by appointment. Often, the area meeting encourages local activity or finds that much of its interfaith initiative is focused on one Meeting:

As an area meeting, Leeds is involved with Concord ([www.concord-leeds.org.uk](http://www.concord-leeds.org.uk)), one of the oldest interfaith groups in the UK. Many of their events are held at Carlton Hill, the central meeting house in Leeds.

#### **CASE STUDY: Manchester and Warrington**

The area meeting has previously funded Asylum Links for the region, where we funded assistance to those seeking asylum. Currently this assistance is given only via one local Quaker meeting. When a person must travel for an appeal interview and needs assistance, we are contacted and provide a friend at point of arrival in the city, an escort to the interview and a friend to wait with them. Usually, a meal is shared before escorting them back to their transportation home. The Quaker friend finances this personally, so all is rather quietly done but greatly appreciated.

One area of involvement relates to a night shelter for destitute asylum seekers. Friends from the area meeting volunteer at [the Central Manchester Meeting House] to welcome asylum seekers on seven nights per week from October until May, offering a safe and warm space with cups of tea and coffee, the opportunity to have a conversation or to play a game or watch a film. Asylum seekers (or guests) are then collected from the meeting house and taken to one of seven local churches to have a meal and spend the night. Until this year, the night shelter was for men only, but arrangements for women have now been put in place.

The night shelter was previously coordinated by a Friend appointed by the area meeting, but this role has now been taken over by a staff member of the Boaz Trust. Friends continue to give their time and fill the spaces on the rota. The women's night shelter is hosted by Methodist Central Hall on Oldham Street in Manchester, but again has volunteers and guests representing a number of faith traditions.

I am also aware that some Friends visit those who are detained in detention centres, including those in detention at Manchester Airport. This may not be classed as ecumenical or interfaith work, but involves befriending those of all faiths and none.

Another area where Friends engage with those of other faiths is that of chaplaincy: we have two prison chaplains appointed by our area meeting who visit Risley Prison, and a representative to the University of Manchester who supports a monthly meeting for worship at the university chaplaincy.

We have recently received an invitation to attend an event at the University of Salford's multifaith centre because it has been recognised that there are students at the university who identify as Quaker... We hope to give consideration to the possibility of appointing a Quaker chaplain or representative who can make links with the University of Salford. The Manchester universities' chaplaincy also caters for students from the Royal Northern

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College of Music and the Business School as well as the University of Manchester and Manchester Metropolitan University.

As in the above case, interfaith work may well be more focused on witness, the interfaith connection being made through service.

#### **CASE STUDY: South Wales**

We are aware of the following ecumenical/interfaith contacts and projects within South Wales Area Meeting:

- We have appointed a QCCIR representative who receives and shares the correspondence and attends conferences.
- Individual Friends have established and maintained links with a Reform synagogue in one of our major cities.
- [Local meetings] provide speakers on request to various church and faith groups – for example, Mothers' Union meetings (Church in Wales) and the Progressive Christianity Network, to name but two that we are aware of!
- Friends serve as part of interfaith prison chaplaincy teams.
- Individual Friends are very involved in the City of Sanctuary movement.

#### **CASE STUDY: Chilterns Area**

I am the chair of SACRE in Buckinghamshire, and have been for about nine years now. We meet three times a year, two meetings in a school where we receive a presentation about RE in their school and once at the place of worship of one of our membership, where we learn about the faith, the building and how its architecture, design and artefacts enhance and support the worship and the religion. Once a year we hold an inset day and we take serving teachers and one or two SACRE members to three or four places of worship in close proximity.

In addition, we hold a development day with a specific theme. Currently we are addressing the theme 'identity in difference'. We applied for and were successful in receiving a grant from Westhill and this is what we are planning currently.

Art Beyond Belief has been asked by the Buckinghamshire SACRE group to work with them on 'Resilient Me, Resilient You', a programme for Year 6 and Year 7 students that explores issues of identity and diversity for young people as they transition from primary to secondary education.

The aim of the project is to engage pupils in Buckinghamshire who are at the critical point

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of movement from primary to secondary education to explore the growing diversity of cultures in the area – both to celebrate diversity and to open up dialogue on the issues that cultural diversity can bring. They will do this through dialogue, discussion and conversation, sharing their experiences and perspectives, and exploring together the themes of identity, controversy and the role of faiths and beliefs in life.

...SACREs have a clearly defined membership. Apart from the county councillors and serving teachers, [there] are C of E representatives and one [representative] of each of the other denominations and other faiths represented in the county. We also have a member of the British Humanist Association on our membership.

Sometimes, as with SACREs, there are structures that allow direct area meeting involvement: “We also have two representatives who attend [the local] Council of Christians and Jews. These representatives are appointed by area meeting.”

In summary, area meetings tend to work ecumenically and in interfaith relations mainly in relation to regional structures, including local authority standing committees on religious education, although a number of individual Friends and meetings are conducting ecumenical and interfaith work independently.

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#### Staff

Yearly Meeting staff reported a variety of types of ecumenical and interfaith involvement: personal informal connections, collegueship with those of different faiths and more formal work-based connections. These could be through formal channels or informal ones. Not all connections were about working in the same direction – some might involve delicate dialogue to talk through an issue.

A staff member for the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI), a World Council of Churches programme which in the UK and Ireland is coordinated by Quakers, alone reported over one hundred different such connections. These included contact with:

- the Baptist Union of Great Britain
- the Methodist Church
- the United Reformed Church
- the Church of Scotland
- the Joint Public Issues Team (which brings together the Baptist Union, the Methodist Church, the United Reformed Church and the Church of Scotland)
- the Scottish Episcopal Church
- CAFOD
- Pax Christi
- Christian Aid
- the Presbyterian Church of Wales
- the Lutheran Council of Great Britain
- Norwegian Church Aid
- the Norwegian Refugee Council
- the United Church of Canada
- the World Council of Churches
- Churches Together in Britain and Ireland
- the Iona Community
- the Church of Sweden
- the South African Council of Churches
- the Middle East Council of Churches
- the Jerusalem Interchurch Centre
- the Church of England (international offices and about a dozen dioceses)
- HEKS – Hilfswerk der evangelischen Kirchen Schweiz
- Rabbis for Human Rights, Israel
- the Board of Deputies of British Jews
- Reform Judaism UK
- Ohel Avraham Synagogue, Haifa
- Liberal Judaism
- EAPPI national coordinators (church bodies and agencies) in Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, Denmark, Ecuador, Finland, France, Germany, Norway, Philippines, Poland, South Africa, Sweden, Switzerland, Uruguay, and the US
- the National Council of Churches in India
- the offices of the heads of churches in Jerusalem (Latin Patriarch, Greek Orthodox Patriarch, Armenian Patriarch, Eastern Orthodox Patriarch, Lutheran World Federation, Anglican Church)

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- St George's Anglican Cathedral, Jerusalem
- Tantur, Jerusalem
- Middle East Ecumenical Network UK
- Christians Aware
- Amos Trust
- Embrace the Middle East
- USPG – United Society Partners in the Gospel
- Church Mission Society
- Fellowship of Reconciliation
- the Muslim Council of Britain
- the East London Mosque

Much of this is pragmatic as well as programmatic and can vary depending on the changing priorities of centrally managed work.

Staff from Children and Young People's Section reported that they invited representatives from the Methodists, URC, Church of England and Unitarians to attend Junior Yearly Meeting each year. At Yearly Meeting Gathering, guests came from the Methodists, URC and Church of England. One worker attends an ecumenical group for children's workers and another goes to meetings of national youth officers.

Another staff member represents Quakers on the Children's Ministry Network (CMN), formerly the Consultative Group on Ministry among Children. This is an official network of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (CTBI), constituted in 1972, which exists to bring together all those with national responsibility for work with children in denominations and Christian agencies who are in sympathy with CTBI's aims and objectives. Meetings are held twice a year. In turn, CMN takes part in the European Conference on Christian Education (ECCE), a forum for churches and agencies, Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox, in all parts of Europe. This meets every three years and considers major thinking related to Christian education in general and to work with children in particular.

This kind of direct colleagueship with equivalent post-holders in other churches was the most common form of ecumenical contact reported. Staff represent Quakers even if they are not Quaker themselves.

It is worth noting that Woodbrooke, while not part of the Yearly Meeting, has run 46 events on an interfaith theme over the past six years, and considerably more than that which include an element of Christian ecumenism.

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#### Quaker groups and registered bodies

**Quaker Concern for Animals (QCA)** reported a strong and historic interfaith witness. As the faith-based animal protection sphere is pretty small, many members are collaborating with other faiths frequently – for instance, at slaughterhouse vigils and Remembrance Day events and in various info-sharing and networking initiatives. “QCA is a founding member of the Animal Interfaith Alliance as well, which brings them into close working with Jains and Christians. Two QCA Quakers are directors, in fact.”

The convenor of QCA is a member of Catholic Concern for Animals, the Anglican Society for the Welfare of Animals and the Jewish Vegetarian Society. This sort of cross-membership is very common for QCA Quakers. Talks on animal issues at the London Interfaith Centre and sermons on the subject of animals at the Unitarian Church in Golders Green and on Quakerism and animal protection last year at St Paul’s Church, Marylebone (as part of its Lent programme), as well as presentations for chapters of Scriptural Reasoning, are typical activities.

**Friends with Jewish Connections** aims “to provide support to members and attenders... as they discern how they can best help Quaker-Jewish dialogue”. The group itself does not have any formal relations with Jewish organisations, but its members often organise or participate in local discussion groups with members of the Jewish community. It has invited a former chair of the Council of Christians and Jews to speak, and has had links with a rabbi who works for the American Friends Service Committee. In a sense, the group itself is an interfaith one, in that some of its members are exploring their own Jewish connections. In this way it also acts as a support group for self-exploration. It also serves to make Friends aware of issues that may arise from Quaker stances and declarations on Israel/Palestine – in fact, the group came into being as a result of the Quaker statement on Israel/Palestine at Bath Yearly Meeting in 2013.

One local Meeting reported interfaith involvement with their **Light group**.

Experiment with Light does not organise anything formally but recognises that Light groups around the country do sometimes contain a mixture of Quaker and non-Quakers together. One group is entirely made up of [people from] other Christian denominations, apart from the Quaker organiser.

#### **CASE STUDY: Quaker Universalist Group**

I suppose our main aim is contact with other churches and faith groups, but in an indirect way. As you know, our founders (see *Qf&p* 27.04) set out the principle “that no one faith can claim to be a final revelation or to have a monopoly of the truth”. At QUG we try to understand the implications of this principle as we look at the big questions. For example, from 2015–2017 in our annual conferences we have looked at meaning and purpose, compassion and mysticism.

We try at each conference to get a variety of speakers from different faith (or non-faith) backgrounds. So, recently we have had representatives from the following:

- 2015 – Buddhist, Muslim (Sufi), three Quakers
- 2016 – Buddhist, Muslim (Sufi), Jesuit, social scientist, one Quaker

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- 2017 – Anglican, speaker on Judaism, Hindu, two Quakers

Next year [2018], we will be considering truth. One of the questions we are looking at is: What does the Quaker testimony of truth and integrity mean when we live in a pluralist society with many different religions (or none) claiming to be ‘the truth’? This question is faced by anyone who chooses to connect with other faiths.

Over the years, QUG has built up a wide range of literature. There is our journal *Universalist*, which comes out three times per year. There are also our 36 pamphlets (with two more, based on last year’s conference on mysticism, just about to be published – these have been written to help people understand the questions behind the various faiths (or none). Two recent examples are no. 33, *Quakerism and Buddhism: The cutting edge*, and no. 34, *Islam today: A Muslim Quaker’s view*. Most of these pamphlets are now available online, including those two (see [qug.org.uk/publications/pamphlets](http://qug.org.uk/publications/pamphlets)). Tony Philpott’s book *From Christian to Quaker* also tackles some of the questions raised by living in a pluralist society.

**The Kindlers**, who are similar to the Quaker Universalist Group, have produced a volume dedicated to interfaith connections (Tucker and Ramamurthy, 2013).

**Friends House Moscow (FHM)** is in contact with Church and Peace, an ecumenical peace organisation based in Europe, and also very informally connected, via a common contact, with the Mennonites who have a centre in eastern Ukraine.

**Friends Community Development Trust (Uganda)** reported a link with a local charity that is quite closely connected to a Church of Uganda church in Manafwa. A development the trust is currently supporting “is on land which they have donated.”

Philip Austin of the **Northern Friends Peace Board** reported formal and ongoing ecumenical links through the Network of Christian Peace Organisations (NCPO, [www.ncpo.org.uk](http://www.ncpo.org.uk)), and added:

Over the past 15 or so years we have done various bits of work around the theme of ‘building peace in diverse Britain’, with interfaith groups and individuals being significant contributors and participants at conferences and other activities that we put on. For example, Anjum Anwar, the dialogue officer at Blackburn Cathedral, made a number of contributions. We had a Muslim woman from Kirklees, Mashuda Shaikh, playing a key role in our project group for a number of years. My personal involvement with Bolton Interfaith [Council] (and, through that, interfaith groups across Greater Manchester) started through work links on this, and whilst that is now principally something I do in my own time, there is still a rather fuzzy – but creative – overlap.

The group **Quaker Concern around Dying and Death (QDD)** reported that they had not actively sought links with other churches or faiths but have made good use of any that have arisen. They liaise with the Churches’ Funerals Group (CFG), which is supported administratively by the Church of England but includes representatives from about two dozen Christian denominations. One Friend worked on the Christian funerals stall at two trade exhibitions and attended a day conference on the spirituality of natural burials at Durham University on behalf of the CFG.

QDD has an email group with over a hundred members. Messages, reports and



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contributions to the group fluctuate – in some months there is a flurry of excitement, in others very little. It is clear that some members have tenuous links with or little involvement in Quakers, while others seem deeply rooted. At all its gatherings there are people who are not Quaker, and not Christian. “Members of QDD have been involved in Death Cafes since they were invented. This often involves working ecumenically. Death Cafes (if you use that brand name) must be non-religious, non-commercial, without any point of view, because participants are to be free to explore and talk without any form of direction. This need to be open both allows a free discussion of beliefs amongst the organisers, which may include humanists, as well as constraining any explicit point of view at the events themselves.”

The **Quaker Service Memorial Trust** reported that its exhibition about Quaker alternative service during the two world wars is located in several meeting houses across the country, to make it easier for hire. Since 2012, it has been displayed mostly in meeting houses but also in cathedrals, university libraries, theatres and civic centres.

In summary, the overall response from Quaker groups and registered bodies was limited, but reveals a pragmatic connection with other church and faith groups, depending on the aims and mission of each. No Quaker group or registered body has an explicit ecumenical or interfaith remit, but it appears that they will readily engage where this will further their purpose or activity.

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#### Conclusions

Local Meetings are strong in ecumenical and interfaith work, more so than area meetings, because of the localised nature of ecumenical and interfaith structures and the ability of individuals to act locally out of their own enthusiasm more easily than in terms of area meeting geography. They are involved in terms of friendship, mutual learning and witness work. Interfaith work is often incidental to witness work.

Yearly Meeting staff are mainly involved in ecumenical and interfaith networks for those in similar posts or with similar aims, or where there are common interests. More work would need to be done to map the full extent of staff connections, bearing in mind the sensitivity of some of these. The work that Woodbrooke staff have done, and the connections they have made, over the last decade should not be ignored.

Whether Quaker-registered bodies are more or less involved depends on their own particular interests. These connections will often take place informally or be made by members as individuals rather than on behalf of the group.

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#### Appendix: Address to OCCIR on the situation in Wales, 2016

Talk to OCCIR meeting in Cardiff, at its invitation  
Cardiff Quaker Meeting House, 2016

I live in almost the most religionless area in Wales, in Rhondda Cynon Taf (RCT). Five wards in RCT are amongst only 12 in all of England and Wales where a majority (over 50%) of people said in the last census that they had no religion. The only council wards nationally with higher figures than Maerdy in the Rhondda Fach were found in Brighton and Hove. Despite there being a residual image of the Welsh as a chapel-going, hymn-loving lot, it is far from the truth. In the 2011 census, Wales overall had the highest proportion of people in our nations which reported no religion – at nearly a third of the population.

Of course, within each of our countries in the Yearly Meeting – England, Scotland, Wales – the lack of religious affiliation varies from region to region within that country. While 32% in Wales overall have no religion, it's 42% in RCT, where I live, which takes in many of the old industrial and mining towns and villages (in the days when industry and mining existed). Only Blaenau Gwent region outdoes it in lack of religion, with a similar industrial background and recent history.

The census showed that godlessness had grown over the preceding decade. Caerphilly, just outside RCT, had the largest percentage-point increase in 'no religion' since 2001, risen almost 17 percentage points to 41%. Blaenau Gwent, RCT and Torfaen had risen 15–16 percentage points over that decade, too.

While I've given you [in a handout] census percentages for individual religions in Wales [in 2011], it's as well to register that 'no religion' is a fast-growing category. If it continues, it will help to balance the inevitable shift in numbers with a religion which will have taken place post-2011, in light of EU-related migration and the refugee crisis among other things.

...Muslims in Wales were just 1.5% of the population in 2011 – and that's a doubling of the Muslim population in the 10 years since 2001, but... they are to be found almost entirely in Cardiff, Newport and, to a lesser extent, Swansea. Fifty per cent of all Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs in Wales live in Cardiff.

Generally speaking, it's only in the larger conurbations of Cardiff, Swansea and Newport that you find any numbers of practitioners of religions other than Christianity, though there are some anomalies. Here is one: 55% of the small numbers of Buddhists in Wales are white British rather than Asian British (and so, I'd surmise, probably practising modern Western variants of the tradition) and Buddhists are found in greatest numbers in Ceredigion, to the west. In time past, that area had a bit of a reputation for escapist and alternative lifestyles.

Judaism is dying in Wales. There are two synagogues in Cardiff, Orthodox and Reform, and theirs (when they each have a rabbi) are the only rabbis in Wales. For the Orthodox in recent years it has been Chabad-Lubavitch Hasidic rabbis who have moved in to fill the role and try to revive the community. All of Wales's Jewry is in major decline. A tiny number of religiously inclined Jews are left in Newport.

In the north of Wales, the only worshipping Orthodox Jewish group is in Llandudno and, just like in Swansea, there are generally too few men for a minyan, so they can't have a service. Sensibly, since it is a seaside place, they have leased out part of their building as a retreat centre for the Chabad-Lubavitch Hasidic Jewish group so that when

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Lubavitcher Jews and Jewish holidaymakers from elsewhere come to Llandudno (from Leeds, Manchester, Liverpool, London) there are enough men to hold worship, and a rabbi to officiate. Otherwise, they can't hold a service because of lack of numbers. In Wrexham, a small group of Liberal Jews meets around half a dozen times a year in each other's houses and holds a seder at Passover.

All this... is against the background of the fact that in the 20th century there were around 40 Jewish congregations in Wales, many in the industrial valleys. None of those is left. In the 1960s, '70s, Cardiff's synagogues had around four thousand registered members. Now, the Orthodox and Reform leaders and youth and welfare groups in Cardiff have started to show some cooperation with each other because of the community's decline. Judaism throughout the whole of Britain is only being saved numerically by the 'Haredisation' of the religion. ('Haredi' [is] a word from the Hebrew root meaning 'to tremble or quake'. They are 'quakers', too, but in most respects wholly unlike us in outlook!) This is because Hasidic and other Haredi groups (sometimes called 'ultra Orthodox' Jews, a term they dislike) have exceptionally large families – 11–15 children is not that unusual. They are clustered around London, Greater Manchester and Gateshead. Some Chabad-Lubavitch well-intentioned rabbis apart, they are not a bit interested in interfaith activity. I know a Friend in North Wales who was quite surprised and offended at their flat refusal to join an interfaith gathering – but she just hadn't understood the nature of this kind of Jewish community.

In short, in Wales religious Jews are a threatened species. There are now fewer than 2,000 self-identified Jews of any religious persuasion (including secular Jews) in the whole of Wales; but that still makes them more than double the size of Quakers in number (members and attenders combined).

#### **Interfaith activity**

Any serious attempt at interfaith activity in Wales is likely to be focused in the larger towns. Indeed, in very many towns and villages the Sikhs or Hindus or Jews may be a lone family isolated from [their] wider religious community. Cardiff, Swansea and Newport apart, it is other university towns such as Lampeter, Aberystwyth, Bangor, [and] Wrexham which will have a more mixed religious population. Lampeter has been exceptional in having for decades had a centre for Islamic studies funded by the Emirates (if I remember rightly), which brought in overseas staff and overseas students and a higher profile for Muslims... Meaningful interfaith activity has always been something of an uphill struggle in Wales.

However, increased immigration and the arrival of refugees and asylum seekers is now bringing more non-Christian believers into Wales, and more diverse Christians, too – Polish and Portuguese and Middle Eastern, for example. Cytûn (Churches Together in Wales) and local church groups and Friends may be interacting with refugee and asylum-seeker groups via such things as the Nation of Sanctuary and Cities of Sanctuary initiatives. This brings a new take on what we might call 'interfaith activity', and one which appeals to many Quakers in its practicality. Some interfaith groups at local level have also been conscious of the possibilities for practical working together for the public good.

For example, Cardiff Third Sector Council realised the potential and encouraged the South Cardiff Interfaith Network, which meets in Grangetown, a multicultural part of Cardiff, as a community partnership of faith-based organisations, for promoting development and community support. It said that [its] aims were, among other things:

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- to provide representation of faith communities to statutory and other agencies and to campaign on issues of importance for those communities
- to empower and support individual faith groups and smaller networks of faith groups to engage in community initiatives
- to play an important role in encouraging community development and cohesion
- to celebrate diversity and commonality
- to open new possibilities for partnership.

In Tangnefedd, the north-east Wales interfaith, peace and justice forum serving Denbighshire, Flintshire and Wrexham, one of the aims was ‘to increase understanding between people of religious and non-religious belief’. That’s realistic, given the extent of non-religiosity and also hostility to religion. Like quite a number of other groups, this was based at a university, at Wrexham Glyndwr University, and [it] was originally called the North Wales Racial Justice and Interfaith Forum. It seems to me that it’s often on university campuses and led by chaplains that these things form. Swansea Faiths Forum used to be based at the university chaplaincy. I have belonged to one such group in a university close to where I live. They are open to all, though university-based.

My own feeling is that interfaith work does not get much traction in Wales. Interactions locally are often of well-intentioned but very superficial kinds. At a non-local level, the Interfaith Council for Wales promotes interfaith dialogue and cooperation in civil society and engagement with WAG [the Welsh Assembly Government]. In turn, it can access the Faith Communities Forum in the Assembly.

#### **Where do Friends stand in all this?**

In Wales we are small in numbers – barely over 70 members across the whole of Mid Wales, for example – and old in terms of our demographic. We are largely absent from the areas of greatest indifference or hostility to religion – almost no Quakers live in the Valleys, for example, and we tend not to live in those parts of cities and their suburbs which are most multicultural.

However, at more institutional level we gain in terms of ecumenical and interfaith work by being part of Cytûn (Churches Together in Wales), and Meeting of Friends in Wales [MFW] links with it in a variety of ways, contribute to its activities and projects, have a representative on its board, one on its finance team also, and in the absence of paid officers dealing with policy or church and society (such as churches have) we have appointed a member of MFW’s Wales focus group to sit on its Laser (church and society policy officers) group. This helps to apprise us of what the Assembly is up to, and to promote appropriate action by ourselves or in association with others. We send representatives to the gatherings of other denominations (and we have to do this for both Welsh-using and English-using denominations, of course – this is an aspect of ecumenism in Wales which the rest of you don’t have).

In terms of working cooperatively with others... a couple of years ago, MFW was approached by the Unitarians in Wales, who see themselves [as being] like Quakers in being liberal in stance and accepting of diversity. Unitarians were once a powerful presence in Welsh religion, but now are declined to something under 300 in the whole of Wales. The approach was made to ask us to consider providing a joint presence at public events: e.g. perhaps having a Unitarian and Quaker tent at the annual National Eisteddfod. The clerks of MFW scheduled the Unitarian representative to come to talk at a meeting of MFW [but] it never happened – the person concerned moved on to other work and it was never reignited as an idea. Unitarians are not accepted in Cytûn, so it would



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probably have been problematic in any case – not least because we also contribute to Churches Together's presence at the Eisteddfod already and it wouldn't be easy to drum up the Welsh-speaking Quaker personnel for a double week-long presence.

At local meeting level in Wales, things will be no different from Quakers countrywide: i.e. meetings and individuals may belong to a range of networks for ecumenical contact and where interfaith activity is the aim or an inevitability. They include local Cytûn/Churches Together groups; interfaith groups; national networks and their local branches, such as the Council of Christians and Jews. They may be working for, or with, organisations such as Diverse Cymru, with charities supporting refugees and asylum seekers – indeed, may have created charities locally, such as Alan Thomas of Swansea, who's also now chair of trustees of the national City of Sanctuary charity – or be active in Quaker-coordinated initiatives, such as ecumenical accompaniment in Israel/Palestine, with all the ecumenical and interfaith liaison and awareness-raising which go with that on return. Friends individually and on a meeting basis may take opportunities to support, for example, mosque open days, to respond in solidarity to times of difficulty for or hostility towards other religious groups, and so on.

And there are initiatives around which may be interfaith by nature, if not in primary intent. In South Wales, one is called Peace Feast. It was started by some evangelical Christians in Cardiff and involves a meal, maybe in a church, mosque, etc., but is not only intended for the religious person. Asylum seekers etc. can be among those who go along. At each session, one person tells their story, or two are juxtaposed: a story which sometimes may have involved great hardship and a long journey to end up in South Wales and/or which may have a religious dimension. I know a number of Friends who go along. I know many more, of course, who are volunteers with bigger initiatives to support refugees and asylum seekers – indeed, who have given rooms in their homes to people who need them or who invite different people to visit and eat with them, to get them beyond Cardiff or Swansea. This may involve interfaith or Christian ecumenical encounter by default.

At the next meeting of Meeting of Friends in Wales... our speaker is going to be from the Centre for the Study of Islam in the UK at Cardiff University, from my old university department. It may help us to know more of the make-up of Muslim communities in Britain and what lies behind the scare stories, the truth of radicalisation, the significance of the dominance of Deobandi-influenced mosques, the roles of imams and their training and so on. The Centre provides a course on Islam free online – and has a very good public lecture series for any who can get to it. I warmly invite you to access this site [sites.cardiff.ac.uk/islamukcentre] and see the range of things – recorded lectures, information on events, etc. – which are available.

#### To close

Secularisation and migration have altered the demographics of religion in Wales. As elsewhere, many of its church and chapel buildings have morphed into flats or carpet warehouses, with often the highest density of such buildings being in parts of Wales with low density of population. Religious institutions are not at the heart of Welsh society but are exercising influence from the margins. That said, the demographics of religion are notoriously tricky and it's hard to say what the figures actually mean – and they will be shifting as we speak. The trend to decline in conventional religiosity among Christians is clear, though. Other things need to be measured to get a complete picture.

**Christine Trevett**