

## Case example 6

### South West Quakers

Creating connections across a region

There are three area meetings in the patch covered by Pip, the Vibrancy worker for Devon, Cornwall and West Somerset. Having someone with a role that focuses on the region but spreads across the three areas has helped to 'cross-fertilise' ideas and approaches and revitalise regional connections. An area meeting clerk reflected on the issue:

Part of the ongoing challenge for area meetings in the South West is our geographical shape and location. We used to have quite a vibrant Devon and Cornwall gathering but that was in danger of slipping away. Pip was quite instrumental in encouraging us to revive that and take a cross-area look at witness and other things.

Pip was able to take some time to get to know the area meetings and local meetings in the region and supported almost all of them at some point over the three-year Vibrancy pilot. Some Friends in the region felt that Pip helped them gain a 'broader perspective' because of the links she could bring across areas, regions and with central structures, while still being grounded in the locality:

That personal contact with Pip is so crucial. It doesn't exist anywhere else ... Pip's so rooted in her local community and has that contact with HQ and the other Vibrancy workers across the country, which makes for rich connections.

### Reforming a regional committee

An early focus of Pip's work in the region was to reform and support the Devon and Cornwall Gathering arrangements committee. An area meeting clerk explained how this had been worthwhile:

That has been a major thing. There wasn't a committee but there was a pot of money but no one knew what to do. We might have just floated on in some bewilderment, no one knowing who to liaise with ... There was a conflict to do with it some years ago and the group ceased. She has taken that group and found a way forward.

Pip's support to the group included facilitation, liaison,



research and website support. In the following two years, several meetings for learning were financed through it and a residential gathering was held and enjoyed by many.

### **Nurturing Friends' ideas and involvement**

Pip encouraged individual Friends' passions and helped these to 'ripple out' across the area and from Devon into Cornwall:

Pip, through her contacts and enthusiasm, worked very hard with someone in Tavistock who was writing a book about conscientious objectors in Dartmoor prison. As a result we've established an annual pilgrimage along the conscientious objectors' road. With Pip's encouragement, we're holding an annual Meeting for Worship there ... At that time he [the writer] wasn't greatly involved with Friends and he has since become a member.

The clerk of Cornwall area meeting at the time reflected her appreciation for being invited to join with such events outside of her area:

Pip's been contacting us about events being held in Devon, for example the Meeting for Worship held outside Dartmoor prison ... She's been opening things up and helping to get rid of this assumption that the Tamar is a wall ... She's encouraging us to cross the river and work with Friends and learn from each other.

### **Supporting a joint event**

In the second year of Vibrancy, Pip's work reached into West Somerset, extending into this area a group that Pip had set up for people in Devon and Cornwall who had completed the Equipping for Ministry course at Woodbrooke. A key piece of work since then in West Somerset was the development and delivery of the 'Different Meetings, Meeting Differently' event. A local Friend explains how it came about:

The idea came together because I sent Pip a link to a Unitarian Chapel in London which seems to have been very forward thinking. I went to a service there and was very impressed by their way of offering wisdom words to people, incorporating music and a chance for people to share their stories. Their website was also brilliant. I felt that Quakers could learn from this, against the background of the talk at a national level about doing things differently and simplifying and trying to be more inclusive.

Pip engaged staff at Britain Yearly Meeting and Woodbrooke who could help to develop and deliver the event. A Woodbrooke staff member reflected on the shared process:

Pip and I had phone conversations around what it would look like, what Woodbrooke could offer, what else was needed. Then she spoke to Friends and we spoke again. It wasn't just Pip saying 'Come and do your programme on this date.' It was much more of an iterative, collaborative construction of the day.

Staff also worked in partnership with Friends from West Somerset area meeting to run the sessions, sometimes 'providing resources' that Friends used as a basis for their own input and reflection. One Friend in particular was able to be very engaged, given her experience:

It just so happened that someone in our area meeting had written her thesis on the writings of Wess Daniels, which inspired us for the event, so she helped to run the day. It all seemed right that we should be doing this at this time.

In line with the precedent already set, the invitation to attend the event was extended outside of the area meeting:

We had a good response in the area meeting and from Devon and Cornwall and someone from a neighbouring





area meeting too. The room was really full. The Woodbrooke staff member who was involved summed up the day:

**There was good conversation and it offered a chance for people to talk to those from other meetings who still understood their situation. I think people had an interesting day and got some input and felt like someone was there to help and support them.**

Staff felt it went well because it was meeting a current need and was not an 'off-the-shelf product'. It was also felt that Pip's local knowledge and the involvement of local Friends made it more relevant to those attending. Friends appreciated the link to Woodbrooke and Britain Yearly Meeting staff, who were felt to be 'extremely helpful to us'. Pip was also able to broker central support into the region when she engaged someone from Quaker Life to jointly facilitate a threshing meeting in Cornwall with her, which was 'one of the first area meeting experiences of a threshing meeting together'.

### **Strengthening relationships with Friends House**

Pip arranged for a small group to visit Friends House as part of strengthening Friends' connection to central structures. She was also responding to an area meeting clerk's concern that 'quite a number of Friends in our area meeting had no contact with Friends House and may have the impression they were just telling us what to do'. Those who went had a chance to 'talk to staff, look at the library and historical records and get a feeling for the wider picture'. It also gave them a 'better, stronger, clearer perspective of why and what we do, and what can and can't be done'. One attendee reflected that the trip made things feel real for her:

**I got a real sense of seriousness and belonging to what the Quakers were ... it was a really good thing to do to help me feel part of the community.**

What made this Vibrancy work successful? Pip's connections across all three area meetings were particularly useful at this time. She noted that 'All three area meetings in the South West, in common with many other area meetings in Britain, have all experimented with structures in recent years.' Pip's role was to support review groups and to share things across meetings, to reassure meetings and to inspire and encourage them to 'think boldly':

**She's enabled us to look at things from a wider context. She can say: 'You're not the only area meeting looking at this. Here's some examples of what they've done elsewhere.' ... It's enabled us to take a more strategic look rather than just a local look at the issues facing us.**

However, Pip also reflected that, although the sharing of ideas and approaches was important, it was done with sensitivity and an appreciation that each meeting should take the time to find out what was right for them:

**It is tempting to look at what works for Friends in other areas and import these ideas. Perhaps we unconsciously seek external Friends who can provide us with a quick solution or affirmation, whether it be around our Quaker structures, or in discernments around property, right ordering, misunderstandings ... It is essential to seek help, ideas and share stories, but we need to remember that we then need to discern what is right for our circumstances, for our community.**



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