

their consciousness.' I think of my Eve returning to the Garden of Eden, having torched it to the ground prior to her departure, except for the Central Clearing of the soul, which is inviolate. She stands outside the closed Gate and raises her eyes to Creativa, the greatest goddess. 'There are no barriers, no barriers, no barriers', she says. 'That is what I have learnt in my life . . .' And Creativa smiles, and commands the seraphim to lift their flaming swords, and open the Gate to the regenerated garden.

QUAKERS AND CONFLICT: AN OXYMORON

Susan Robson

Introduction

When I started my research there were two common reactions. From non-Quakers came the title of this piece. 'Quakers and conflict', said my English teacher friend, 'but that's an oxymoron'. To her the words just didn't go together. Another Anglican colleague said, 'What do you have to do, go round stirring up all the peaceful Quaker meetings to get some material?' But Quakers said firstly 'wow' in an impressed tone of voice, then pulled themselves together and added 'about time too' or 'that really needs to be done', and occasionally 'you're very brave'.

This piece will ask the question whether there is conflict to be found among Quakers; what is it about, how is it expressed or acted out, and what resources are used to help it. It will not look much at underlying explanations of why this may be, or what might happen next. These topics are and will be examined further elsewhere (Robson, 2005, 2006).

In June 1999 a cartoon appeared in *The Friend*, Fat Cat, as the PM clerk, sits under the clock and says to the meeting, 'If we cannot agree to alterations to the meeting house—shall we turn to ideas for peace in Kosovo?' This neatly expressed the puzzle which provoked my research project: though Quakers are not good at resolving their own conflicts they feel it their duty to be involved in the more complex and difficult conflicts of other people in other parts of the world.

The framework of the project extended over four years. There were

three series of interviews with different kinds of Quakers: seven 'key informants' with wide and deep experience in the Society of Friends, 25 grassroots Quakers, the conscientious core from 25 monthly meetings in the north of the UK, eight 'edge Quakers' from nearer the periphery or with a particular focus. There was a workshop with 20 self-selected Quakers, who reflected on their experience of conflict for six months and recorded this, then met together again. Throughout this time I was also acting as an observing participant in active and responsible roles in Quaker life. I kept a field notebook and a research journal. Throughout all these processes I tried hard to guard people's anonymity and privacy. I still continue to have conversations with Quakers on this subject, both formally and informally, and continue to learn from other people's experience. Some people may find that my findings are insubstantial and nebulous because they lack number, proportions and statistics. This is quite deliberate. My approach is not a quantitative one, but one which tries to seek out meaning and consequences through listening and enabling others to speak. My findings tentatively open windows and await other views to combine with them in a fuller picture.

The Quaker view of conflict

People frequently asked 'what do you mean by conflict?' I tried hard to avoid defining it for the participants, though if pushed I used Schrock-Schenk's phrase 'differences with tension'. However, many people came to the interviews with lists in their notebooks of what they had called conflicts in their Quaker experience. Usually these were disagreements that came to the attention of the local group at least, and often arose or were handled within a meeting of the group. There was only one account of a disagreement between two individual Quakers which did not involve others, and which they cleared themselves. Most of the other contributors were not aware that they had had conflicts with individuals; what they remembered and instanced were occasions when carrying a role, such as clerk or elder, had taken them into a particular position of conflict. There was one contributor alone who commented how strange it was that he had never had a disagreement with another Quaker 'because it is normal for people to take up different positions'. Most other contributors seemed to think a low level of inter-personal conflict was natural to Quakers.

For many people conflict is seen as a negative thing. Indeed they find it difficult to talk about it without appending another word such as resolu-

tion or management, which offers hope of a happy ending. Quakers and others tell me with conviction that I study conflict resolution when I have said that I study conflict, or perhaps conflict handling. The idea that conflict can be observed without attempting to make it better is apparently very unpalatable. It was only occasionally in books that I encountered the idea that conflict can be positive, or fun, or result in creative solutions (Fisher, 2004). My contributors sometimes wondered if this might be possible but only one convinced me that he experienced it.

Examples of Quaker conflict

What were these examples of Quaker conflict? In my data there was hardly any mention of theological differences; diversity of belief was acknowledged and accepted and if there were tensions they were experienced discreetly. Most obviously conflict occurred when decisions had to be taken where the whole group had to support a practical plan which involved finance and figures, where a specific figure had to be agreed within a time limit. There was a large grouping of stories about 'when we came to change the meeting house' (i.e. relocation, sale, development), and an almost equally large group of stories concerning wardenship or other kinds of Quaker employment. These were the most frequently recurring themes. In addition unacceptable spoken contributions in meeting for worship were mentioned in detail several times, but much more often in passing. Issues about the ending of membership, either on the initiative of the member or the meeting, were well known, as was hassle (keenly felt by parents) about the behaviour of young children in meeting. Perhaps more surprisingly some contributors mentioned conflict with the meeting after a relationship breakdown; this was related to the meeting's perceived failure to comfort or respect the different status of partners within the meeting, not to disapproval of the split or siding with either partner.

After these fairly tidy categories there seemed to be a ragbag of different reasons for Quaker conflict, but on reflection a common thread emerged. These were all issues about 'how things should be done' focused on Quaker procedures and meetings. This invokes what Dandelion (1996) describes as the behavioural creed. For instance these included inappropriate behaviour (canvassing before a meeting), opposition after a meeting had taken a decision, and issues about the role of the clerk and the meeting. These were initial reasons for disputes but there were others

which fell in this category where the initial reason had almost been forgotten but the continuing saga about correct process, or indeed negotiating Quaker identity, had gained a momentum of its own. The message sent between opposing and estranged individuals or factions was 'You're not being a proper Quaker'. The original issue may have been factual, but it was identity conflict, about ideal Quaker behaviour, which prolonged and postponed an outcome.

Reactions to Quaker conflict

When conflict was acknowledged it was experienced as surprising, even shocking and distressing (Wrench, 2006). The articulate and educated contributors shared a reluctance to speak authoritatively about what to do in conflict. They presented as fumbling and lacking in confidence to deal with conflict. Procedures and techniques were known about but relatively rarely used and found to be of limited effectiveness. There was confusion about the use of clearness meetings, though occasional helpful use of them. Mediation was even less frequent, with trained mediators practising outside the society but not called on within it. Discretion and confidentiality surrounded the activities of local Quaker conflict resolution groups, so much so that Friends were often unaware that they had been laid down for lack of work. One such new group was set up during the time of the project but felt that Friends did not use their services enough (Northumbria MM, 2006).

In 2000, at the beginning of the project, there was much more focus than usual on how Quakers should handle conflict. Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre ran the first practical course on conflict handling in meetings; there was a Yearly Meeting session on this topic; the Committee for Eldership and Oversight published a book on the topic; the annual conference for Quakers at the Tuke Centre was on this topic; Quaker Life Representative Council devoted a day to the topic. I was able to take part in these events. This rush to consider conflict was not continued at the same pace in subsequent years and in 2006 the question is raised whether Quakers do want to learn how to handle conflict (Bowers & Wells-Bruges 2006).

There was no doubt among the contributors that Quakers had something valuable to offer the wider world at community and international level, where their efforts at conflict resolution were uncritically evaluated as very positive. Because of the belief in expertise in this field there was a

feeling that somehow Quakers themselves ought to be able to cope without disputing or to resolve conflicts swiftly and easily. In reality they were no better or worse at this than non-Quakers, 'but they ought to be better . . . given what they say' was a recurring comment. Interestingly some Quakers were aware that they experienced different standards in different contexts. A Quaker councillor in local politics quite enjoyed the public cut and thrust that this involved, but arguments among Quakers distressed him. The Quaker group is expected to be without such things.

However, there was, sometimes reluctant, acknowledgement that disputes do arise. More often it was felt that they were evaded, either by intelligent foresight and alternative action, by the process of 'walking round it' and not exploring the differences, or by accommodation and giving in before a confrontation is reached. 'Sweeping under the carpet' was an often used phrase, but although recognised as a Quaker habit, there was doubt whether it was more common among Quakers than other groups. One Friend thought that when there was a really bad conflict the Quaker community handles it well, but this was not supported by the grassroots accounts of several large conflicts involving various levels of the Society lasting over several years.

Three characteristics of Quaker conflict emerged from the accumulation of gentle voices. Avoidance is so strong that it becomes 'aversion', relationship is more important than (right?) outcome, and moderate presentation is the only acceptable form.

Avoidance or aversion

Quakers may avoid conflict in several ways: by not recognising it, by calling it something else, or by 'walking round' it. One contributor with a lifetime as a Quaker and recent experience of local ferment could not remember conflict.

'Not in a sense where there's division and hatred, no, I hope I'm true here. One tends to forget about the bad things in life and remember good ones. I'm not conscious of such things, I'm conscious of knowing there's been difficulties between [people] but I haven't actually come across something.'

It was common for Quakers to accommodate to others in the group. One Friend had a plan within her area of expertise, but finding opposition from a powerful, very responsible and respected Friend, redefined it as 'a minor thing and I just let it go. I never did it. But I did do it a couple of years after

she died.'

Contributors accepted that conflict avoidance was common both within and outside Quakerism and that it could happen inadvertently. They were not comfortable with this.

'I believe most of us have a knowledge of when we're ducking something. We kind of do it so quickly we don't notice. It's almost like you've swallowed a bad taste. And we don't even want to notice that we've swallowed it, but I think many of us do know.'

Another contributor identified a typical Quaker way of behaving which he called 'walking round' conflict:

'the conflict is about what colour to paint the bathroom and there's one faction that wants to paint it beige and another faction that want to paint it grey, then rather than actually deal with the conflict a third party will say let's paint it red and then you do that. It avoids the original [issue], it doesn't deal with the conflict, it just goes round it, takes a third way.'

The 'third way' was not referring to the sudden unexpected inrush of the Holy Spirit in the Quaker business meeting, but the evasion of exploring issues of more consequence than the colour of a bathroom.

Conflict avoidance is not always possible, but it would certainly be Friends' preference. However, after five years I was forced to conclude that often Friends do not get as close as avoidance, which implies some awareness that the conflict exists. I found the word 'aversion', turning the eyes and the mind away, seemed to describe Friends' behaviour in many circumstances. It also carries the connotation of distaste which seems to fit well.

Relationship or outcome

The dual concern model of conflict handling (the model which underlies the animal typology of conflict handling found in *Conflict in meetings* (QHS 2000, 2005)) suggests that people in conflict are pulled by two interests, concern for the relationship with the opponent and concern for the outcome. However, these are not always easily separable and this is particularly the case for Quakers. The theory of the Quaker business method rules out the idea of opposition, of right/wrong, win/lose, or even balancing the wishes of the majority and the minorities. It presupposes that there is an outcome, or way forward which, if no longer interpreted as the single will of God, is more pleasing to God or that which is held to be

good. The process of seeking this outcome is one of finding unity, and people are expected to submit their individual personal views to this process and be willing to relinquish them to it. This is the theory, which sometimes works, but it also allows people to put the process of unity first as an end in itself, rather than together in unity seeking the outcome most pleasing to God. This process results in frustration and lack of exploration of issues, and possibly lack of achievement of action and change. It is at its most vapid when there are issues of justice at stake rather than preference. There is also a less explicit belief among Friends that hurt to each other must be avoided if they are to create and maintain the Quaker community. This relates to the third characteristic of moderated expression described below.

Moderation and restraint

This third characteristic is the moderated way in which Quakers present themselves to each other and the outside world. It is 'unQuakerly' to be loud, pushy, express negative emotion strongly, to show off, especially in material ways. Olwen Morgan argues for vehemence, but in Quaker conflict that is often counterproductive. Quakers sometimes bemoan the lack of passion, but only on certain subjects and in certain ways. These are unspoken rules about style. In addition there is a strong demand for confidentiality, for not talking about others, or to others, which extends in the end to not talking about the self. The Friends who 'pondered' after the workshop found themselves tied in knots about what they could and should say to whom about conflict which they were experiencing. It seemed as if Friends had borrowed a motto from other contexts, 'don't ask, don't tell, don't even think about it'. That was the easiest way to be comfortable. Anger and other ugly emotions are 'unQuakerly' and relegated to 'the shadow', where they are not explored. Becoming calm inside may be more important than communicating or changing the outside world.

Among the contributors were several people with a different view of conflict, as something which is a part of their life which they are working on and developing. These people had been involved with counselling or therapy, either as recipients or professionally, and had learnt to explore inside themselves: *'lots of these things were unravelled for me. That was quite helpful. I'd run away from any kind of conflict rather than face it for quite a lot of my life . . . it has changed a lot.'*

William Penn's template

When William Penn set up Pennsylvania he anticipated that there would be conflicts, so he made a template for how these should be handled based on Matthew 18:15-17. In Britain Yearly Meeting this is largely unknown, with the exceptions of Hartshorne (1993) and Cronk (1991), but Mennonites have built a whole structure of congregational commitment to conflict resolution on this same passage (Lederach, 1999). When British Friends hear about it they become very interested, perhaps because it appears to offer a firm outline for what should be done. Simplified, it comprises four stages:

- 1) speak directly to the person who has offended you;
- 2) if that does not work, take someone from the church to act as third party between you;
- 3) if that does not work, place the dispute before the whole church to help in its solution;
- 4) if that does not work, act as Jesus did with the gentiles.

It depends on your denomination how you interpret the last instruction, there are variations from evangelical churches on the internet. In Quaker language it might be rendered as: sit with your opponent and enjoy the bring-and-share lunch together.

However, many Quakers jib at the first injunction, to speak directly to the person who has offended them; despite Quaker traditions of plain speaking this often seems too difficult. A group of Quakers working on this subject after the end of my project came to the conclusion that there needed to be an instruction before number 1. It should remind us, as indeed John Paul Lederach does, to spend time in reflection or prayer about the difficulty before we start to work on the problem. This, if anywhere, is where a proper clearness process can be useful in conflict. This preparatory pause was something which was noticeably lacking in the stories told to me by most of the research participants.

However, though Quakers are looking for a recipe 'tell us how to do it', Penn's outline is not very appealing to modern Quakers, not least because it is Biblically based. They prefer to remain uncertain and hesitant about conflict rather than to test out well tried steps and see how far they will carry them.

THE FRIENDS QUARTERLY

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