

An Introduction and Invitation to Friends at Southern Marches Area Meeting

Hello, my name is Andy. My wife, Jane and I live in Peterchurch and have been attending Hereford LM since October 2018. We have been made to feel very welcome during this time. Coming to Quakers has really helped us make sense of our journey over the last couple of decades or so. A journey that brought us from Buckinghamshire to Herefordshire eight years ago.

For me personally, a significant part of that journey (as it is for many) has been working out how my 'faith' affects what I do (and how I do it) in the world of 'work' where many of us spend so much of our time. That journey began for me as a young graduate in the investment department of Friends Provident, an insurance company founded by Quakers. My professional career in finance ended with my own little company I called "Responsible Stewardship" offering advice in ethical investment and sustainable business.

One of the things that really attracted me to Quakers was the message that for Friends faith is a way of life: that Quakers put their faith into action in different ways and believe they can make a difference in the world. Indeed, it was an interest in 'Faith at Work' that eventually led me back into academia.

Ten years ago I finished a masters degree in Sustainable Development with research into the role that a network of around 100 churches and faith-based organisations in Kampala, Uganda plays in helping vulnerable children 'at risk'.

More recently, I participated in community project run by and based in a church working in partnership with Herefordshire Council. I combined my role there with some postgraduate research into the changing role of churches and attitudes to 'religion' in the life of a local community.

These raised further questions and provoked me to continue a search that eventually led to the Quakers. As a result, at the ripe age of fifty, I am now a full-time doctoral student in the Theology and Religious Studies department at the University of Wales in Lampeter.

My personal interest in becoming a Quaker and my academic interests are difficult to disentangle. I became aware of the local Quaker community and the work of British Quakers more generally at Almeley meeting house about 3 years ago during a day retreat with my church. I was especially struck by the Quaker literature in the library. I recall telling my vicar, "this really speaks my language".

More recently, I've suggested to my University Professor that scholars of contemporary religion might be looking in the wrong places for answers to the questions they are currently asking. These concern the role of religion, spirituality or faith in what they describe as a 'postmodern' culture in a 'postsecular' society.

Scholars have traced a long-term decline in religious participation, especially in the church since the 1960s. They have looked for signs of life instead in New Spiritualities or new forms of older religious traditions. But what about the activists taking to the streets with "Extinction Rebellion"? Some of these are Quakers. Moreover, Friends have been committed to social reform and political engagement for most of its nearly 400 year history.

What does this tell us about 'faith' in a diverse society of many intersecting cultures today? Perhaps the stories and experiences of ordinary Quakers today can supply some answers and offer unique insights: especially into pressing issues of difference and change facing society.

We are encouraged in *Quaker Faith & Practice* and by staff at Friends House to share our stories with one another and in the wider world. I very much hope therefore that Friends in the Southern Marches might be willing to participate in a new research project I have begun. You can do so by simply sharing your stories

with me. My PhD supervisor would call these 'interviews'. But really it is about making space to reflect together on our different journeys: what it means to be or become 'Quaker'.

The result of this exercise for me will be a dissertation presented to University examiners. But my hope is that this written account of the life of Friends in the Southern Marches can make a wider contribution too.

Jane and I feel we have found a 'home' among Friends. I hope we can get to know more of you while conducting the research over the next year or so. I would of course be glad to chat with Friends about the project and to hear your thoughts. If you have any questions or are willing to be involved in the project I would be delighted to hear from you.

In Friendship,

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