

Session 5 Thursday morning

I am Ann Morgan a member of Lancashire Central and North Area Quaker Meeting, I worship at Lancaster Meeting and I am the Convenor of the Quaker Living Wage Campaign. (POINT TO EXPLANATORY THE SLIDE BEHIND ME). I have been asked to talk about how we are building a movement to make a difference by working with others beyond our Quaker Community.

My journey started in November 2014 when I attended a Quaker conference entitled 'Food Banks are not enough'. As we upheld the Clerks writing the minute I found I was being led by the Spirit to take action, but what action?

Friends is it right that in a society that expects everyone of working age to work that 22% of our working population does not earn enough to live on? Addressing wage poverty seemed an appropriate way forward.

A small group established to test this leading began to gather information to set up a campaign and that brought me into contact with a number of organisations. I discovered that The Living Wage Foundation has undertaken research amongst the businesses paying the voluntary Living Wage which highlights significant benefits to the businesses as well as to the employees. The Equality Trust monthly newsletter collates research undertaken by the Joseph Rowntree Trust, the Resolution Foundation, government departments and other useful reports. All this material enabled us to develop documents to hand out to the public that included quotations from employers and employees, materials all incidentally available on our webpage.

We used the lead up to Christmas 2014 to witness in the City centre each Saturday and were joined by many Lancaster Friends. We observed that our leaflets were being read and found none on the pavement when we finished. Some, we were told, would find their way onto noticeboards in workplaces. The stories we heard from people who thanked us for speaking out about wage poverty really confirmed that the Spirit had led us to the right course of action.

In Quaker Equality Week 2015 we made promoting the voluntary Living Wage our theme for action. Lancaster meeting house is very well used by the community so we mounted a display in the entrance hall that stimulated conversations. I had been a member of the Co-operative Society for as long as I can remember and was horrified to discover that they did not and still do not pay the voluntary Living Wage. That week we started a letter writing campaign to the Co-operative Group. We like to think that our letters provoked the organisation to start thinking about payment of the Living Wage and reducing the remuneration package of their CEO. We are delighted that they are now in discussions with the Living Wage Foundation.

There was a Manchester gathering in June 2015 to review Quaker Equality Week. We reported on our activities and Lancaster Meeting was invited to consider leading a Quaker Living Wage Campaign. Meeting discerned that it would.

Our Campaign Group grew and we decided that we had to put our own house in order first if we were to have credibility. We encouraged our Area Meeting Trustees to follow through becoming an accredited Living Wage Employer. Then we could set

about encouraging the rest of our Quaker Community to join us for it would be only then that Quakers could really witness and speak to businesses beyond Friends. Our Area Meeting became accredited in 2015.

We set up a meeting with staff from the Living Wage Foundation to explain the campaign we were embarking on across Britain Yearly Meeting. This was to be the start of an interesting and fruitful relationship. We explained some of our Quaker employment practices, the concept of giving service as a volunteer warden or as a Friend in Residence they found baffling and the practice of providing free accommodation and payment of utility bills in exchange for duties was met with incomprehension that anyone would work for no actual money!

The Living Wage Foundation was keen to work with us and we were quite keen to work with them as we felt it might give us a way of influencing their accreditation policies. We were invited to partner with them but we found that we could not sign the partnership agreement presented to us. Whilst we were content to work as they asked 'working in a spirit of collaboration, mutual respect and trust recognising that everyone has a valuable contribution to make' could any Friend disagree with that, some of the language used in the document and the restrictions put on what we could do needed negotiation. We were invited to revise the partnership agreement.

What did we need to change? The agreement required us to be open to any newcomers from our locality. We wanted to be a Quaker only group. Our clause opens membership of the campaign group to members and attenders of a Quaker meeting.

We were required to always act within the law. We explained our Quaker history of challenging the law and breaking the law to speak truth to power. We removed that clause.

We were not to apply for charitable status. Area Meetings are registered charities so that clause had to be removed.

Words such as 'win' were replaced by 'encourage', Quaker business methods were inserted and we made it clear that we were working within our Quaker Community and not with businesses.

Finally we needed to reserve the right to lay down the Quaker National Living Wage Campaign Group hoping that there would come a time when our objective to build a Quaker Living Wage Community would be achieved.

In late 2015 we became partners with the Living Wage Foundation and the materials, support and enthusiasm that we get from them have been invaluable.

Friends, collaborating with others to build a movement can lead to unforeseen questioning of one's own practices. Working with the Living Wage Foundation has led us to examine more closely Quaker employment practices in relation to wardens. We question if it is right to have Warden's given free accommodation but no pay? Could Meetings consider free accommodation as payment for a caretaking role and pay the voluntary Living Wage for the time spent carrying out other duties?

Should Friends be examining if it is appropriate to continue to seek wardens from just amongst our membership at a time when 150 families each week are turned out of their homes. Perhaps Area Meetings might be willing to discern further their current employment policies.

Working so closely with the Living Wage Foundation to build a Quaker Living Wage Community is proving to be both challenging and rewarding.

Ann Morgan
July 2017