

Epistle from EMES Section Annual Meeting

held at Haus Venusberg, Bonn, Germany 4 – 7 May 2017

To all Friends everywhere greetings. We wish you vibrancy in your meetings: Vivacita! Zivost! Vitalite! Liewenskraaft a vitaliteit! Elinvoima! Medryckande vibrerande! Die strahlende Lebendigkeit! Beogacht! ¡Vibrantes con mucha vida! Opgewekt en blijmoedig!

We send loving greetings from a beautifully wooded area on the edge of Bonn, where forty six Friends have met to bring our Section business up to date, see one another's faces, hear one another's stories and gather inspiration for the future development of Quakers in Europe and the Middle East. Our theme of 'Vibrant Meetings, Vibrant Section', introduced by Simon Best of Woodbrooke, was followed by useful small group discussions. Vibrancy includes the creative imagination that helps us work effectively to bring the future into being – an apt link with the function of QUNO Geneva. Lindsey Fielder Cooke inspired us with practical examples of the ways in which QUNO's quiet informal provision of safe confidential discussion spaces makes a contribution on unpopular fronts and helps persuade diplomats of the interrelationship between issues such as human rights, peace-building, and climate change. She argued that climate change is only one of nine great challenges, the first two being biodiversity (extinction) and chemical pollution. Yet she also named specific examples that gave us hope that change is occurring and our efforts can help accelerate positive action. We urge Friends to consult the QUNO website, for its list of concise reasons for Friends to take urgent action on climate change.

We were glad to hear of the continued vibrancy of European & Middle Eastern Young Friends, an organisation now over 30 years old. A separate discussion focused on changed provision for teenagers/young adults. Plans in hand for the Quaker Youth Pilgrimage would leave 16–18 year olds without dedicated events; EMES is exploring ways to ensure that EMES teenagers continue to have opportunities for transformational meetings with one another.

We learned of the dedicated work of volunteer Friends at the Eurosatory Arms Trade Fair. They provide a necessary distinctive protesting voice, seeking real contact and not confrontation with arms dealers and customers.

From a Czech Friend we heard of exciting developments for Quakers in Central Europe; with EMES support, isolated Friends have met annually since the mid-1990s as the Central European Gathering of Friends. Now this has led to the major step of deciding that Friends in Poland, Hungary, Austria and Czech Republic will combine as the Central European Regional Meeting and will support the growth of emerging small meetings and worship groups spanning several languages and cultures. Preparatory meetings and the main gathering are now held three times yearly as they learn their responsibilities and develop their practice.

The Conference of European Churches sent out an Open Letter on the Future of Europe to its members in 2016, requesting responses in preparation for the 2018 General Assembly in Novi Sad. Were we prepared to strengthen the voice of Quakers as a peace church by endorsing the draft Quaker response which was brought to us by a small group of Friends who had been working on it since the Peace & Service Consultation in 2016? Only by doing so would EMES be in a position to put a strong peace church view at Novi Sad. Our discussion movingly emphasised the underlying unity of European faith groups and the importance of our being a visible part of the Conference. We wholeheartedly decided to endorse the document and to commend it to Yearly Meetings.

Following an introduction from Julia Ryberg, we spent time in small groups thinking about how any of our Section's Meetings outside Britain Yearly Meeting might put forward imaginative projects as applications to the Small Grants Fund (or spiritual growth fund, a nickname that appealed to everyone as being immediately appropriate). Projects might be to help meetings document their own stories and those of key individuals; this would itself grow and strengthen the meetings and would provide outreach tools. Visiting and interviewing other meetings could be very stimulating. Work on key documents could

help increase the number and range of Faith & Practice documents (pamphlets, booklets, books, web-books) across our Section. We have much to explore further, new ideas to try, friendships to maintain and develop, work to do, hope to nourish by action.

Several workshop sessions led us deeper into agenda topics. Some of us learned about theories of conflict resolution. Others spent time considering worshipfully what intervisitation is, reminding ourselves that it stems from meeting to 'see one another's faces and open our hearts one to another' as George Fox put it in the Yearly Meeting Epistle of 1668. We were moved to hear how crucial the long tradition of such visiting is to isolated Friends and we thought of our responsibility to help support worship in our small European groups. This brings just as much joy to visitors as those being visited. It is a truly mutual enrichment. We encourage Friends to think of committing to this as a theme in their own Area, Yearly and Regional Meetings. If each meeting found a minimum of one Friend to visit another meeting, whether nearby or across a border, we should greatly deepen the awareness of 'Friends on the bench' of being members of a Section and should create widening webs of F/friendship.

In our time together we widened those friendship webs informally through sharing meetings for walking, for museum visiting, for entertainment – and for learning to draw Quaker cartoons (though we shall never match the skill and wit of our teacher Erik Dries).

We part, grateful for this opportunity and hoping to meet again in Bergen, Norway in June 2018, shortly before the bicentenary of the founding of Quakers in Norway. Norwegian Friends have accommodation at the event for more than three times the usual number of participants. So come and join us and support the growth of intervisitation in the Section!

Signed on behalf of FWCC EMES

Sue Glover Frykman

Clerk