

Movement Building - Tim Gee

Monday afternoon

Good morning Friends, my name is Tim Gee, and I bring greetings from Peckham Meeting,

I'm glad to have been asked to introduce the discussion about movement building. It is something that I have seen as core to my understanding of myself as a Quaker, and of Quakers' role – past and present – in wider society.

I suppose my journey begins as a teenage Friend at a Quaker Summer-school, hearing a talk about the injustices of homophobia. I'd seen and experienced it up close at school, so to encounter someone who was part of turning the tide was deeply inspiring. I got involved in a token way at the tail-end of the campaign against a terrible piece of legislation called Section 28 (you probably remember it) which prevented teachers from talking about homosexuality as an ordinary thing at school. And that change happened. Section 28 was scrapped. My part was miniscule, but what I felt part of and now see even more, is the way that a movement has transformed how British society thinks about same-sex relationships.

As longstanding advocates of equal rights - including our decision to recognise same-sex marriage before the state did - Friends can be proud of our role in that movement. Within a generation, what once seemed impossible, now seems, in hindsight, almost inevitable. But it wasn't. A movement made, and still making, all the difference.

A year after that Summer-school I found myself helping set up my college anti-war group, using those skills of inclusive facilitation and teamwork I'd learnt on Quaker Young People's Committees. When I made the link between war for oil and oil causing climate change, I became a climate change campaigner, a passion which has since become my job.

Quaker Faith and Practice includes a quote from George Gorman which resonates with the theme of movement building. It's the one that begins "One of the unexpected things I have learnt in my life as a Quaker is that religion is basically about relationships between people" And continues: "It is in and through all things that we hear God speaking to us. But ...it's in my relationships with people that the deepest religious truths are most vividly disclosed".

This speaks to me, because it says – for me – what a movement is and why movement building is part of who we are. When I think of war, poverty, discrimination, environmental damage, I think of it as a sign that those right relationships have broken down. Religion for me is about healing those broken relationships; something that has been part of the spiritual life of the Friends since our foundation, and indeed – when I think of the two great commandments to love God and love your neighbour – fundamental to the teachings of Jesus himself.

A few years ago I had the opportunity to do some study, that led to a book, looking at some of the great shifts of history. A few things jumped out. One was that great progressive changes have rarely taken place through elite-level advocacy alone, but through movements - often taking risks - to challenge, erode and redistribute elite-power. Another was that maxim commonly attributed to Gandhi, 'First they ignore you, then they ridicule you, then they fight you, then you win'. Sometimes that last bit

is 'then they build monuments to you' – and if they do that I'm not sure if you've won or not. Either way, again and again this seemed to correspond to the stages that successful movements passed through, of raising consciousness, coordinating a movement, confronting power, and consolidating gains.

Each of these stages speaks to a different kind of relationship. Firstly our relationship with God – the promptings of love and truth which drive us and make us conscious of what each our individual contributions might be. The second is our relationships with one another, within our meetings, but also around us, in our communities. The third is a decision about how we relate to elite power: on each issue asking; should we engage, should we challenge, or should we become that power? The fourth is the struggle to maintain progress without being co-opted by the systems we set out to transform.

In some ways this pattern corresponds to the story we read in the Gospels. The Book of Mark for example begins with John, who so disliked the Roman occupation of Palestine that he took to the wilderness to live off an (eccentrically sustainable) diet of locusts and honey. But even from the fringes of society he starts, what we might now call 'modelling the new society in the shell of the old'. The Romans probably ignored then laughed at him.

But then - most likely from this group - Jesus emerges, who we first meet meditating, then organizing working class fisher-folk, then coordinating mass movements of people in open-air meetings and engaging in acts that challenged the ruling occupiers. The Romans become so nervous that they assassinate John. But still the movement keeps growing, leading to a symbolic confrontation at the temple, and Jesus' crucifixion. But, as we know, that wasn't the end.

For the next few centuries the church was small, subversive and suppressed by the state. It was mostly pacifist, there was great diversity in people's approach to the divine, and to some extent it modelled a more equal society, at least internally to the community. Accounts of those times seem strongly redolent of at least some modern movements for social change.

There is a direct link between the early church and many of the social movements of the 17th Century from which our Society emerged. The Diggers – to give just one example - were named after a passage in The Book of Acts. When George Fox climbed Pendle Hill and saw 'A great people to be gathered', he was recognizing the need to move from mass-consciousness to coordinating a movement, which, with Margaret Fell and the people who have since become known as the valiant sixty, he did.

Another link between the early Christians and the early Quakers was the belief of both that 'the Kingdom of Heaven' was at hand. It's a term that means different things to different people. I often wonder if I can hear an echo of it in that much-repeated quote of Arundhati Roy; 'Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day I can hear her breathing'.

Friends, at our best we have been harbingers of that better world. Our Society is set up like a movement; non-hierarchically networked and making change happen. Individual Friends are a quiet presence in many progressive movements and our meetings have long been a backbone of the peace movement. Thinking to the movement that I am most closely connected to, our decision to divest our money from fossil fuels just a few years ago has helped accelerate a wave of commitments

across institutions to similarly start their own processes of removing their economic consent for environmental destruction.

Yet, for all that, I worry that we can also be insular, fearing of the people outside the meeting house window, and sometimes more like a memorial to movements past than a contemporary force in modern life.

Perhaps the small act of dividing the Overseer role in to two, one to build the community of the meeting, one to listen to and build solidarity with the wider community, might be a tangible amendment that could assist us to play the kind of role that we have inherited from our forebears.

And so friends, I have some questions for us: In the context of cuts, of climate change, of poverty, a great people is gathering already. I want to ask, what is our role? How do you feel led to participate? How could your meeting listen to your local community and forge alliances, to understand the concerns of those who live around you? What kind of support could we offer – is it physical? Is it economic? Is it spiritual? And I suppose I want to humbly ask some bigger questions as well. Are we, like John more comfortable in the wilderness, existing prophetically but peripherally? Or are we willing to join with our communities to turn the tables at the temple, if necessary?

These are my questions, Friends, I would wish to submit for our discernment, as a yearly meeting, over the coming year.