**Racism and the Religious Society of Friends**

Seven thousand kilometres away from Geneva, George Floyd died on the streets of Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA. And here we are, some three weeks later, examining our hearts and minds for the stains of racism contained within.

For many of us, it has been a crushing realization to realise that we are so far away from the centres of protest. Some of us have been feeling helpless. Nonetheless, we have come together as a Quaker community to reflect, to educate ourselves and work out what to do next.

I have found comfort in the realisation that I do not have to have all the answers. Racism in society, or even in myself, is not something that I am going to fix straight away. Just being on this journey, being involved in my community and being willing to change is enough.

We will be more helpful to the anti-racist cause in the future if, today, we educate ourselves and we try to understand. Listening and learning are powerful tools.

All of us need to do better. Ourselves as individuals and our wider society. And, in between, the Religious Society of Friends.

Yes, it turns out that despite having a testimony (or value of) equality, even within our own faith community we do not always practise equality.

With our Wednesday evening 17 June Spiritual Deepening session, I propose that we use our trusted dyads process to explore our response to racism within Quakers.

To give ourselves a head start, I encourage you to explore the resources that I have found on my own journey into the subject of racism and the Religious Society of Friends.

After the session last Wednesday, 10 June, a few of us stuck around at the end and continued to talk around the subject. In response to a question I had about what, ultimately, people wanted to get out of these sessions, one Friend said that they wanted to be an ally. The more I have reflected on our work together, the more I have realised that this is what I am aiming to be - an ally.

So here are my proposals for how to start on being an anti-racist ally in our Quaker community.

1. **Understand that I am racist**

From Britain Yearly Meeting, Nim Njuguna writes about being the only black person at a British Quaker gathering, in The Friend: <https://swiss-quakers.ch/en/nim-njuguna-article/>. (You can take a free 30-day trial of The Friend online here <https://thefriend.org/subscribe> and you do not have to give credit card details.)

Nim writes: “ for us as Quakers, with our long history of challenging the status quo, challenging oppression while promoting racial justice is both a practical necessity and a moral imperative. It is also, admittedly, a challenging and potentially divisive exercise for individuals and Meetings to undertake as it moves people beyond ‘celebrating’ diversity and concentrates on confronting the systemic marginalisation and unconscious bias, personally and within our own organisation and Meetings.

As Quakers we are often blind to our own racist assumptions, embracing the narrative that good intentions absolve of us the ability to do harm. My experience of being a Black Quaker in the UK has been largely informed by what I refer to as ‘the five mind sets’ I have encountered: talking about race may threaten to unmask both conscious and unconscious biases and prejudices and I have been astonished at the extent to which intelligent Friends differ on this matter. These are my observations, not judgements.”

Nim goes on to highlight several different categories of people on the anti-racist spectrum (you do need to read the article to appreciate these):

1. The Bedmate Friend
2. The Roommate Friend
3. The Housemate Friend
4. The Next-Door Friend
5. The Across-The-Street Friend

Which are you? Which do you aspire to be? How will you get there?

**2. Understand that my faith community is racist**

Within Geneva Monthly Meeting Library’s collection we have the October 2014 edition of Friends Journal. This edition, “Experience of Friends of Color” is also online, here: <https://www.friendsjournal.org/2014/october-2014/>. Within this collection, Vanessa Julye’s article “A Journey toward Eliminating Racism in the Religious Society of Friends,” struck a chord with me: <https://www.friendsjournal.org/journey-toward-eliminating-racism-religious-society-friends/>. However, all of the articles here are well worth your time.

Vanessa writes: “I heard repeatedly from Friends of color the challenge they experienced of “entering the sea of whiteness” at registration, in the cafeteria, and for the evening plenaries. I have learned to notice the racial and ethnic makeup of my environment and use that information to assess how I respond. I am used to negotiating in these predominantly white environments, but it is exhausting. Why is it so tiring? I live in a world where I am constantly reminded that I am African American and that my race and culture are seen as second class.”

And: “White supremacy is a part of our meetings because it is the foundation upon which the Religious Society of Friends has been established in this country. Enslavement, segregation, and assimilation are a part of Friends history.”

(Also, the GMM library catalogue is available online as a PDF via this page: <http://www.swiss-quakers.ch/ge/library/library.html> and is well worth exploring.)

**3. Understand that our Quaker heritage is littered with racism**

Friends General Conference (an organisation consisting of Quaker meetings across the US and Canada) has done a lot of work on addressing racism over many years. Read this by Vanessa Julye and Donna McDaniel which is brilliant for telling us about those who were on the ‘right’ side of history but also balances this with examples of where Quakers were not so great: <https://www.fgcquaker.org/sites/default/files/attachments/Ministry%20on%20Racism%20conversation%20with%20Vanessa%20and%20Donna_0.pdf>

They highlight that Quakers were not always against slavery. Although they were the first Christian denomination to denounce the practice,

‘Friends differed in their belief of what their religion required of them as they struggled with the issue of enslavement. Friends’ views on enslavement in the 1700s were likely to fall into one of these four categories developed by Thomas Drake, a Quaker historian of European descent:

1) A majority of Friends accepted slavery “without much qualm or question.”

2) Others were “perplexed, but did nothing.”

3) And others “agreed with Englishman George Fox” that slaves should be treated “kindly” and offered a Christian education, but would go no further.

4) Finally, a “sensitive few doubted if Christians should be enslaving their fellow men. —Thomas E. Drake, Quakers and Slavery, p. 9.”’

And: “In the 1830s, when abolitionism began to make a stir in the country as a whole, all Friends did agree that enslavement was an evil that should be ended. Like many others, they were “anti-slavery.” However, not all were for abolition, or certainly not the immediate abolition advocated by the most radical leaders.”

Also: “When Swarthmore reneged in 1933 on admitting a top Philadelphia student when they discovered he was African American, President Frank Ayedelotte, a European-American, was asked to explain the college’s admissions policy. He wrote:

There are certain social difficulties which are peculiar to this college and which make the admission of a Negro student more difficult than would be the case in another institution.”

Then: ‘There were, as before, the voices of the “few” trying to urge Friends on. One was African American Quaker Barrington Dunbar of New York, an acknowledged “thorn” in the side of Friends during the Civil Rights movement. We quote from his 1968 message:

‘Quaker Meetings are a social club “where people meet to pursue their common interests in isolation from the rest of the community. We attend meetings to escape the agonies of an unjust society and to find personal refuge among like-minded Friends. Because our hearts are not stirred or our minds made sensitive to the injustices of the communities in which we live, we accommodate ourselves to a whole system...that has served to reinforce the assumption of white superiority…’

Reading this struck a deep chord with me and my experience of being a Quaker in Geneva and elsewhere. Yes, in our own ways we are doing what we can to bring about a just and peaceful world. But I know that I am complicit in systems that reinforce white superiority...

The FGC document was one of several collated here: <https://www.fgcquaker.org/resources/spiritual-education-eldering-inclusion-racism-and-more>.

And that section was a subsection of the resources collated here: <https://www.fgcquaker.org/resources/resources-fostering-vital-friends-meetings>.

I would encourage anyone who has time to explore these documents - such incredible resources are available to us!

**Next step: dyads to help us explore the issues further**

From the many resources shared above, I will now draw on <https://www.fgcquaker.org/sites/default/files/attachments/Fostering%20Vital%20Meetings%20pt.2.pdf> - a 1999 document created to help Quaker meetings *become vital*. ‘Section R9: Overcoming racism and bias’ has plenty of queries for us to reflect on and to use in our dyads.

*What do we do as Friends in our worship, faith and practice (or witness) that are barriers to inclusivity across racial, cultural and class lines? Another way to say this: What about our practice creates ‘lines’?*

Do I examine constantly and consistently what I think and do, to compare with what I say I believe?

*What would I like to change? Who would I like to include?*

What are we afraid of? What do I fear about change? (What gets in the way?)

*What risks am I willing to take to bring about change? What would it take for me to decide that the concern is real and I wish to act on it?*

How do I let Light shine in such a way that invites people of like minds (in other words ALL people called to be FRIENDS) to be included regardless of race and class? (or, what does current non-inclusivity say about what Light is shining to others?)

From feedback reviewing a draft of this document a Friend felt that some people might prefer a more direct question so we offer this: *Think of a time in your life when you acted/thought/felt in a racist manner - to a black person, a Jew, a Muslim, etc. - and keep that uppermost in your mind throughout the dialogue. Talk to that (other) person - explain yourself, whine about how un-racist you are. Change places and have them talk to you about how they felt.*

**How we will run the dyads session**

First I will invite you to concentrate on your breath, to breathe in and out slowly consciously while I prepare the breakout rooms. Then I will send you in pairs into the breakout rooms for about 35 minutes.

The first few minutes you can exchange who you are, and how you are doing at the moment. Then please start the dyad and allow it to be 30 minutes.

Decide among you who will go first, who is A and who is B. Both A and B will have 5 minutes each (please time yourselves) to explore the question:

B starts the Dyad by asking the question (or an alternative question as agreed with their partner) : “What is alive in you right now? What is your heart whispering to you? What wants to be heard with gentleness right now?” A has 5 minutes to dive in and explore this question while B is offering a silent presence.

After 5 minutes both thank each other and A asks the question “What is alive in you right now? What is your heart whispering to you? What wants to be heard with gentleness right now?”

Now B has 5 minutes to dive in and explore this question while A is offering a silent presence. After 5 minutes both thank each other.

We repeat this process 2 more times, either going deeper into the same question or asking one of the other questions from the list above - you agree with your partner what questions you want them to ask you.

At the end I will give you a five minutes warning and then a one minute warning and then I will close the breakout sessions. Then we share a moment of worship before those of you who choose to leave will go and the others can stay for a few minutes longer to share and listen in the group.