



A Quaker charity serving individuals, families and communities in Northern Ireland

Issue 3

Appeal Newsletter - December 2007

Dear Friends

I am delighted to present the first newsletter of our newly incorporated charity, Quaker Service. In an attempt to strengthen the charity and provide it more protection, the Committee of Ulster Quaker Service Committee agreed with Ulster Quarterly Meeting that now was time for the charity to become a company limited by guarantee. Quaker Service will continue to provide the greatly needed services at Quaker Cottage and at the Monica Barritt Visitors Centre where those who are most disadvantaged in our community are shown love, acceptance, respect and support. This year we have also been working to expand our services and a new volunteer programme "Quaker Connections" is being developed at Maghaberry Prison to provide enhanced services for those in custody and their families. We currently have 8 volunteers, 4 of whom are visiting isolated prisoners and the other 4, providing additional emotional and practical support to visitors actually inside the prison. We have plans to increase our volunteer programme to provide additional services for children and

teenagers visiting prison, to develop a conflict transformation programme for prisoners and their families and to include volunteer opportunities for inmates.

We are very concerned to learn that funding for our very successful teenage programme at Quaker Cottage is in jeopardy. The levels of self harm and suicide in north and west Belfast where our project is based is causing serious concern, and we know that our project is a life line to the young people who attend it. Please read the article by Koulla Yiasouma, the Director of Include Youth who carried out an external evaluation of this project.

Both of these programmes, one old, one new, are desperately needed and so I would appeal to you to continue to support us. It is only with your help that we can continue to transform people's lives and ensure that all people, regardless of their circumstances, are given the chance to realise their full potential.

Roy Blair
Chairman

The story of Jenny, a woman referred to Quaker Cottage (names changed to protect identities)

By 14 years old Jenny's life at home was so awful that she ran away for good - the beatings and abuse from her father were more than she could take and her mother seemed unable to protect her. For weeks she slept in the back of a disused lorry and scraped a living on the streets and for a while she was cared for by the travelling community.

Jenny was vulnerable and soon was befriended by Tom, an older man. At first Tom was nice to her, or so she thought, because he gave her drink, drugs, food and somewhere warm to sleep. By sixteen she was addicted to street drugs and she was pregnant. Jenny set up home with this man who was now dealing in drugs and he often abused her. She had moved from one bad situation to another but this time she did not seem to have the wherewithal to leave.

By the time she was referred to Quaker Cottage she already had a second child and the family's lifestyle was causing great concern to Social Services.

Initially Jenny was cautious about trusting anyone but soon after starting our programme she began to open up - accepting that we were not going to condemn her lifestyle. After seeing her life through the eyes of others she realised that there might be a better way for her to live and to raise her children. She decided to use the support that was available from Quaker Cottage staff and to make radical changes.

Tom was working in the taxi rank the day our bus called to collect Jenny and her children to move them into a Salvation Army Hostel. We lifted bags of clothes, toys and her few ornaments and closed the door for the last time. The violence had stopped. Jenny still needed a lot of our support to help her through the next 18 months in a hostel. She kicked the drug habit and was able to be a much better parent - she even started to like herself. Last December we

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called to her new home with a Christmas hamper and some children's toys. It was very humbling to see how one family's life had completely turned around - a happy picture of children at play in a real home. A dream come true for Jenny.

More recently we have invited Jenny to come and speak to some of the women in our current groups who are having difficulties with drug habits. She has a much more powerful story to tell than any of our staff and hopefully she will be an inspiration to others.

Grant McCullough, Quaker Cottage Manager

Our vision is to promote a society where individuals and families can reach their potential.

Our ethos is informed by Quakerism. The belief in a divine presence in each of our lives is the basis of Friends' concern for peace and social justice and is the prime mover for us establishing various services. This fundamental belief leads us to value the worth and individual potential of each person.

Help me (a poem written by Jenny)

Help me get out of here,
I feel trapped.
Help me get out of here,
There's no way back.
All the doors are closed,
All the paths are a dead end.
Help me get out of here,
I need help.
Help me get out of here,
I need a life.
Maybe I should get a knife,
Take it and try to cut it away,
Try to get back to another day,
Try to be happy for the sake of the kids.
I can't, I just feel trapped.

The Journey

Another Saturday morning, another early start for the Devlin family. Mum rises at 7am so that she can take some time to gather her thoughts for the day. If nothing else, it will probably be the only time she gets to herself until this evening.

It's soon 7.45am, and she calls upstairs, telling Stephen to get his younger brother up, washed and dressed. Stephen is seven, his brother Paul almost three. Meanwhile Mum gets baby Sarah changed from her night garments and feeds her while checking the travel bag for nappies and wipes at the same time. Breakfast is eaten standing up.

The taxi arrives to take them to the station. Same driver, same stilted conversation as last week, as always avoiding mention of the purpose of the journey. Everyone in the small village knows, but few would dare speak of it in front of this family.

*"Another driver will pick you up at half four."
"Thanks. See you next week."*

8.50am, the first train of the day, travelling to Belfast to meet a connection to another town. The journey is always a difficult one, with the children wanting to move around, Mum wanting them still, quiet, and drawing no attention to themselves. An older lady passes, beams a smile at Paul, and asks, "And where are you off to, looking so smart on a Saturday morning?" Paul stands up and announces, "I'm going to see my daddy at work." "Sit down and keep quiet, Paul," snaps Mum, looking the older woman in the eye. She quickly moves further down the train, unsure of what has just happened.

The children's mother stares out the train window, wishing she could take back the last few moments.

They make their connection, Mum's head already aching. She hates these journeys, knowing that she'll be making them for another two years at least. A man on the opposite platform stands with a large brown paper bag, like a potato sack. There are a name, a letter and four numbers written on the side of the bag. She knows where he's coming from and silently wishes him well. She wonders if any of the people milling past have any idea about his life, or her life. They catch the next train.

A further bus journey and they have arrived. It's now almost 11am. Welcome to HMP Maghaberry. The children burn off some energy in the play area at the visitor centre while Mum grabs a quick smoke outside. She nips to the loo, checks her makeup and takes a deep breath, resolving to make this a good visit, no arguments. She steps towards the play area.

"Come on kids. Stephen, grab your sister's bag. Let's go see your Dad."

Michael Kelly,
Visitors' Centre Manager

FWCC Pre-triennial study tour at Moyallon Centre, 7-11 August 2007

Members of the Religious Society of Friends from over 30 countries travelled to Ireland in August for the Friends World Committee for Consultation (FWCC) triennial international conference. Some 18 of these visitors, representing a broad mix of nationalities, came a week early to take part in a study tour on the theme of Peace and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland. Moyallon Centre accommodated the event which had a varied and challenging programme including visits to Quaker Cottage and the Maghaberry Prison Visitors Centre.

Mark Patton from Iowa Yearly Meeting (Conservative) said of his visits to Quaker Service programmes "What a joy to find Friends mending fences and souls in "the Troubles". Your meager efforts are yielding minor miracles daily. Parents and children alike are

lifted up with your help. Who else is trusted enough to work with all sides and gain the trust of those who have lived in fear? Your small light in the sea of darkness is appreciated but little known. Please persist, as political peace is only one step on the long road to reconciliation. Thank you for speaking truth to power and being a caring presence".

An evaluation of the study tour found that most felt they had gained a clearer understanding of the Northern Ireland situation and that they would share this with others, use it in their known situations, keep contact with those met, or even organise exchanges in future. The event exceeded the expectations of those who attended as well as those who helped organise it.

'Thank you for speaking truth to power and being a caring presence'

Launching Quaker Service

Was it the "Flood" second time around? No just a really wet Belfast on a Friday morning. What a day to hold such an important event - the launch of "Quaker Service". But this had been in planning for some months. Invitations had gone to a wide range of statutory and voluntary agencies together with the Churches, community organizations and local politicians.



Patricia Lewsley, NI Commissioner for Children and Young People, receiving a gift from young harpist, Jessica Thompson

The weather was quite awful but it did not stop over 70 representatives finding their way to Frederick Street Meeting House in the City Centre. As they gathered you could feel the atmosphere in the large and welcoming foyer.

Our guest speaker was the N.I. Commissioner for Children and Young People, Patricia Lewsley. She highlighted the levels of child poverty particularly in areas where Quaker Service operates and the related incidence of suicide among

young people. Patricia praised the work of Quaker Service working with “forgotten groups - presenting children and their families with opportunities”. Janette McKnight, our Director, in thanking Patricia for her words of support described our work amongst the disadvantaged young people and deprived communities. She thanked many agencies for their co-operation and support in delivering services.

The launch finished with a shared lunch and the “buzz” around the meeting house

showed the level of friendship and goodwill amongst the organisations involved in this important work.

‘Patricia praised the work of Quaker Service working with “forgotten groups - presenting children and their families with opportunities”

Quaker Care - Two Shops in One City

by Joan Ewing, Quaker Care volunteer,

The first shop opened on the busy fashionable side of the city in 1998. Life here for the volunteer is usually that of the busy shop assistant and requires the patience, sense of humour, tact and other attributes that provide good customer service. This shop is on a road of expensive dress shops, eating places and furniture shops, and in the main its customers reflect this.

Our other shop is on what was once a thriving household shopping road that has seen better days. Although the same good customer service is required from the volunteer there is more time and need for other less tangible skills. The customers are for the main part the older generation often widows and widowers living alone and on pensions, some not much above the poverty level. A visit to Quaker Care may be their only outlet for a chat that day. Here you

are more likely to hear 'I couldn't stand looking at those 4 walls any longer' than 'do you take credit cards?' The volunteer looks at proudly shown photos of grandchildren sent from children in other parts of the province or more often, from other countries.

In the last couple of years there have been more young women coming in from Eastern Europe. Some have a good command of English, others virtually none. One just hopes a welcoming smile will do instead of words, not being able to remark 'that's a lovely t-shirt you have chosen - is it for your daughter?' leaves one feeling inadequate.

Whichever shop the volunteer is in they always remember that the first aim is to bring in money to help towards the services that Quaker Service is providing. I hope this short resume also shows that there is an awareness of a greater human need.

Quaker Service Teenage Project - It Works! - by Koulla Yiasouma, Director of Include Youth

Include Youth has existed since 1979 and works across Northern Ireland, promoting the best interests of and best practice with young people in need or at risk. We were delighted to have been commissioned by Quaker Service to evaluate the Teenage Programme based at Quaker Cottage. It was our first foray into formal evaluation and one we were keen to get right.

Essentially the Project seeks to provide personal development opportunities for the teenage children of the woman involved with the Cottage. The evaluation focused on the work currently being undertaken within the Project which essentially seeks to improve self-confidence and self-esteem of the young people.

It was clear that all the young people were vulnerable and at risk from various behaviours and situations including substance misuse, crime and anti-social behaviour, parental conflict, low educational achievement and poor physical and emotional health. Lack of or poor engagement with educational authorities was a common feature in the lives of all the young people interviewed.

The young people agreed that the Project was very successful.

- “gets you off the streets”
- Safe environment - not being judged
- “Someone to talk to”



- Meet new people, particularly from the other community
- “John is always there, not only when the Project is on”
- Activities - eg music, computers and trips
- Discussion groups - eg drugs, sectarianism and sexual health
- Inclusive decision making

All agreed that they had greater self-confidence, calmer and not so “down in the dumps” whilst some could be more specific, identifying positive changes in areas such as a decline in the levels of crime and anti-social behaviour, end of illegal drug use, lessening of alcohol consumption and improved relationship with parents and family.

It is clear that the level and quality of engagement with some very vulnerable, challenging and marginalised young people that this project achieves would be the envy of many similar projects. Indeed the nature and quality of this work should be celebrated and promoted as an example of good practice.

Celebration With Friends

Board member, Myra Skipper, reminisces about a Quaker Service event held in September

Since the late 1960's Ulster Quaker Service Committee met monthly to consider work in hand, to look at future needs and the implications of attempting to meet them. But on the evening of 27th September 2007 we met with F/friends from across Ulster Quarterly Meeting for a different reason: we met 'in Celebration'. Quaker Service, the name under which the work continues, but now as a 'company limited by guarantee', wanted to share a time in which the vision of those who first began the work, the uniqueness of the many who have used the service, the skill and dedication of all who have worked with us, and the generosity of all those who support us could be recognised and celebrated.

Over a hundred Friends met in Lisburn Meeting House. A young Friend, Megan Lynn, brought us to quietness by the beauty of her violin and voice, so that we were ready to hear Anthony (Tony) Brown, an American baritone, remind us through his songs and words of the needs that exist across the world which are so often met by the joining together of ordinary people. A 'whole world in his hands' as his last song reminded us.

Tim Newell, a Friend from Britain Yearly Meeting, shared his deep experience of the pain and suffering of many who find themselves, or those they love, within the prison system and we were challenged to consider how we may be asked to 'answer that of God' in these circumstances in the future.

We must stop looking for quick fix solutions to complex issues and it can not be claimed that this project has produced well-rounded “citizens” but what it has done is support young people to begin to explore their own potential and broaden their options. The challenge is that in the next phase of their lives they are met with the same acceptance, enthusiasm and commitment that they experienced at the Cottage.

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Roy Blair, Tim Newell, Tony Brown and Janette McKnight (L-R)

Warmth, song, words and food made it truly an evening of celebration, but also a time of hope and expectation for the future.



Small Child Crying - a poem written by a woman attending Quaker Cottage

I feel inside me a small child crying.
I have got to help her,
She is on my mind.
I went back to the past to see what was wrong,
And noticed she had suffered for far too long.
I have never before listened to that little girl inside,
I keep her bottled up and block her from my mind,
I even tried to hurt her and tried to get rid of her,
Because I was afraid of the frightened child in me.
I am taking time now just to see how to release her,
And how to set her free.

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