



Visit with Philip Corrie-Hawes

Philip Corrie-Hawes

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1. Introduction

At the request of Southeast Scotland Area Meeting, Laura and Henry met with Philip at his home to discuss his application for membership. After a pleasant lunch prepared by Philip's husband Mark and some cuddles from their dog Fudge, we settled in to worship, during which some excerpts from QF&P 11.1 were read. Philip then shared with us his background and the ways in which his involvement with Friends had developed.

2. Philip's journey towards membership

Finding the Religious Society of Friends was the result of a process of seeking which Philip entered feeling that something was missing from his life. Philip went to CofE schools, but let go of any idea of religion on leaving school. He considered staunchly that he was an atheist, while recognising that that was a belief in itself. He now sees that ever since then there's been a pattern of moving towards faith, stepping back, looking for faith, or that something that was missing, not finding it and trying again. In looking for a way to make a contribution to peoples lives, a key step came when he took a job as support worker in a mental health setting, after years in financial services. But after 3 years or so he burned out, and realised that he had taken on more than he could manage. Counselling helped him understand that he was a 'highly sensitive person' (HSP) and with that he began a process of digging deeper to find himself. Through this project of self-exploration, he considered how hiding his sexuality had meant always being on guard, wearing a mask and not being his true self. This process enabled Philip to look more deeply at universal human needs and his own unmet needs. 'Non-violent communication' (NVC), introduced by his new boss, also helped. An understanding of HSP and using NVC techniques have helped Philip understand his yearning for belonging, meaning and a place to contribute and participate. Realising this made sense of things he had done in the past without quite realising why, for example a year as a Samaritan, and time as a citizen advocate.

But there was still something missing. Philip began, privately and tentatively, to explore faith. He recognised that because of the environment he grew up in he was culturally Christian, but he doesn't take Christian doctrine or the Bible literally. The Bible has stories about how to live, without being historically true. He began looking for a religious context that was consistent with that, while having at the back of his mind that even if he did seek fellowship he wouldn't be welcomed due to his sexuality. He experimented with local churches, firstly by reading about them extensively online, then contacting them through email, in particular asking for their opinion on gay marriage. First-time response was always positive, but beyond that there was usually some vagueness, along with some explicit negatives. He had looked at Quakers quite early on, along with Humanism, Buddhism and meditation. It took a long time to get to the point of attending a Meeting for Worship, as Philip felt he needed to be hopeful it was going to work, and also that it would be OK with his husband. Mark was unconditionally supportive of Philip's search, and on sending an enquiring email, Philip received a positive response from Laurie Naumann. So, he went to his first Meeting for Worship in Kirkcaldy. Philip describes this as a "phenomenal experience". He found he understood the structure and felt the silence utterly fulfilling. He explains that he "felt quite held". There was no quaking, but an atmosphere he could tap in to. He was welcomed, and asked to introduce himself, which he wasn't expecting, but despite some anxiety he was able to do so. Philip reflected that he drove home smiling: "I've found something I want to go back to". That was two years ago, and he's been

attending regularly since then. He feels that he's now reached the foundation of where he needs to be. He's not done, but he has the basis for exploring further from what is now his spiritual home.

2.1. Where Philip is now

He's very engaged with Friends in a practical sense: he's the Central Fife Local Meeting treasurer, he goes to Area Meeting when he can and he's organising the new monthly Meeting for Worship in Dunfermline. Being in the meeting has become an important strand of what keeps him well. He describes Quakerism as an anchor to come back to when he gets worried or things get too much "a way to reflect and re-energise". He does still struggle to define simply what it is that he gets from it, but he's getting better at living with being unable to do that. He feels fortunate that Britain Yearly Meeting is part of the 'liberal' Quaker tradition. Sitting in silence *and* going regularly to the discussion groups are both part of what has become a very big piece of the jigsaw which makes him who he is.

He did feel the need need to check one last time, it seemed, about whether Quakers were the right answer for him, and so went to the local Episcopal service, and realised halfway through that this was not for him. He is at home in the Meeting, with people who accept him for who he is, and where all views are heard without judgement. He doesn't feel any expectation to say something clever. When ministry comes, it will be given to him.

For him, membership is an outward symbol of commitment, a pledge. It is a kind of label, but the symbolism of offering himself to this part of his life is in making a deeper commitment. And a way of saying that he has something to willingly and lovingly offer to a community, as he's already begun to do.

He sometimes regrets our inability as Quakers to broadcast what we have to offer more effectively. He's loving that he's found a community he can be a part of and where he can feel safe and where you don't have to adhere to a set of rules, which is so refreshing. He recognises that we can blunder and we're fallible but the intention is always to connect, however you describe it. What binds us together is the style of worship, the way we agree on business, viewing what people say without blame or criticism.

He couldn't fit himself to the mode of all the other churches he looked at, whereas Quakerism offered a place to just be, without signing a declaration that you believe certain things.

When asked about Meeting for Worship for Business, Philip noted that we didn't seek consensus, nor did we vote, but looked for where the spirit leads. Not "this is right, this is wrong", but being in the moment, being led to take a particular path at this time and where we all take responsibility.

The visitors let Philip know that they were touched by the sense of a journey from a base that he had expressed. They were grateful that they had been able to share it with him. We closed with a comfortable silence, in no doubt that Philip's membership in our Society was already a reality, now ready for recognition by Area Meeting.