

## YFGM Mental Wellbeing Concern

In our last gathering in October, YFGM agreed to review our corporate Concern about Mental Wellbeing.

In our coming gathering in February, we hope to bring the following questions for YFGM's discernment:

- First, do we still feel that we hold a corporate Concern about Mental Wellbeing?
- Second, do we wish to retain, or to lay down, our Mental Wellbeing Concern Group?

### *What is a Concern?*

Quaker Faith and Practice dedicates several sections of Chapter 13 to illuminating the idea of a Concern as one of the types of service to which Friends may find themselves called, introducing it with these words:

"Throughout the history of the Religious Society of Friends we have recognised that to anyone may come, at any time, a special inward calling to carry out a particular service. It is characterised by a feeling of having been directly called by God and by an imperative to act."

A Concern, in this sense, is not something that we are merely 'very concerned about', in an ordinary sense. Rather, it is a spiritual calling: just as we don't choose to minister in a meeting for worship but must allow ministry to come, in the same way we can't choose to have a Concern.

"'Concern' is a word which has tended to become debased by excessively common usage among Friends, so that too often it is used to cover merely a strong desire. The true 'concern' [emerges as] a gift from God, a leading of his spirit which may not be denied."

As we feel the Spirit at work in the ministry of a gathered meeting, so we feel it at work through us when we act under Concern. QF&P speaks of action taken under a Concern as feeling right and fitting; a Concern coming upon is with sense of love and light leading to the certainty that we must act; and those acting under a Concern finding in themselves a peace and strength which comes from their awareness of the Spirit at work in their actions and discernment.

The question of whether a task which someone feels called to is a Concern in this sense, is one that requires careful discernment by both those involved, and the meeting which surrounds and upholds them and in whose company they listen for the promptings of the Light.

"Throughout the discernment process there should be one overriding principle before the hearts and minds of all: is this individual or group right to believe that this action or

service has been 'laid upon' them by God?"

### *Our Mental Wellbeing Concern*

In October 2014, YFGM adopted Mental Wellbeing as a Concern held by our community as a corporate body.

"This concern has been steadily growing within YFGM's community for some time, reflected in special interest groups, speakers, YF(GM Free)s and above all the energy and enthusiasm of YFGM members. As young Friends we can lead by example, and feel the time is right to stand up and say to the world – 'this is important.'... Our spirit of loving, non-judgmental support offers something unique. We are excited at the prospect of the impact we could make in raising mental wellbeing in the social and political agenda."

At this gathering, YFGM also asked nominations to find members for a working group to carry forward to work of the Concern. Those present at this meeting remember the great energy, enthusiasm and strength of conviction with which YFGM adopted the Concern.

In 2015, our minutes speak of how the Concern was carried on with energy in SIGs, reports, sessions based around personal experience, mindfulness practice, and a visit to the Retreat.

In October 2015, some difficulties were raised with the direction of the working group and the support it was receiving from YFGM as a corporate body:

"The group met in London in August to discuss how to move forward. It has been difficult to decide on an area to focus on, but there are exciting plans..."

"Nominations Committee is led to remind YFGM that mental wellbeing was adopted as a concern, with much enthusiasm, by YFGM as a whole... We remind all Friends in YFGM, including ourselves, to support the concern as appropriate to each of us as individuals and to the roles in which we currently serve."

However, YFGM responded to these difficulties with energy, recognising that the upholding of the Concern corporately held was the work of the whole meeting:

"We all have something different to bring to our concerns, and this weekend has helped us to unite around them as a community."

And in February 2016, reports from a course at Woodbrooke, and the results of a preliminary survey on mental wellbeing and YFGM, are put before the meeting. YFGM agreed to a proposal for a more in-depth survey and the working group began work on it.

"Our decision to research how YFGM affects our mental wellbeing invites us to explore our processes, celebrating the positive experiences that living and worshipping together can bring, and helping us to find ways to support each other even more in the future."

After this meeting, however, the Concern seems to lose its connection to the life of the meeting. The Concern Group are still hard at work, in particular on producing and taking the survey which YFGM asked them for, but this is no longer joined to a lively sense of the Mental Wellbeing Concern as something vital to the meeting. In the seven gatherings following this one, there are only two items in the minutes relating to mental wellbeing: a report on the launch of the survey in October 2016, and a SIG about the concern in Bristol October 2017. (I joined YFGM during this time, and certainly got no sense that the Concern, or any accompanying sense of spiritual guidance and conviction, deeply exercised the meeting.)

In our last meeting in October 2018, we agreed to review the concern. We heard from the Mental Wellbeing Working Group about the recent activities of the working group, and about the working group's sense of uncertainty about how to take our concern forward with the resources, time and energy available to them. The clerks were asked to prepare the ground for a review of the Concern at our meeting in February.

### *Our Review of the Concern*

In preparing for the review of the concern, we found that, though caring for one another's mental wellbeing is a core part of what we want to be as a community, it is less clear that our current way of taking it forward best represents how we actually respond to this aspiration in our life together. It is even less clear that those working most closely on the Concern still feel the peace, rightness, and sense of guidance which our tradition associates with the discerned sense of working under concern.

Since we adopted the concern, YFGM has changed. It's membership is very different and each gathering has more newcomers. Many of the people who were involved in originally bringing the Concern before YFGM, and bringing their energy and passion to its first few years of activities, have moved on.

Further, the wider conversation around mental wellbeing has moved on. The original minute adopting the concern noted that "As young Friends we can lead by example, and feel the time is right to stand up and say to the world – 'this is important.'" At this time - in 2014 - mental health had a lower profile in society than it does now, and open conversation, even amongst our members, more rare and more difficult. Given this change of circumstances, it is not clear that the original vision of what the Concern would be about still leaves something distinctive for YFGM to do.

If we discern that we no longer feel that Mental Wellbeing represents a Concern for YFGM, this need not mean that it isn't important to our community, or that we no longer have work to do with regard to it. Nor would it mean that we've 'given up' or failed. We have had some successes in incorporating parts of our testimony of care for one another into our corporate practices and structures; and QF&P speaks of how laying down a concern may be an opportunity for the celebration of what it achieved and the grace that was shown in its course.

"When a concern has run its course, consideration should be given to how this may be recognised and acknowledged... Celebration for the right ending of what was rightly begun may be appropriate."

At the same time as our Mental Wellbeing Concern, YFGM took on a Concern over the renewal of the Trident nuclear weapons programme. In Edinburgh in February 2017, the decision was taken to lay down the concern, with a great sense of rightness and grace: and a clear sense that though Trident did get renewed, the time, energy and love that had gone into the concern had in no way been wasted or misspent.

If individual members feel that Mental Wellbeing is still a Concern for them, the meeting can choose to support them in various ways ("Recognising concern has also placed an obligation on the meeting which tests and supports it.") The meeting should be aware that if we decide to lay down this concern as a corporate body, we do have the option to release resources and make commitments, both general and specific, to help anyone whose personal witness lies in carrying it on.

Nor is it a foregone conclusion that we are to lay this concern down. In our most recent meeting, a great deal of ministry spoke to how we should look to care for, support and uphold each other. Even if we do feel that we have, in the work we are currently undertaking, lost the sense of peace, rightness and undeniable leading which most properly marks a Concern, by listening and discerning anew, we may discover in this review an opportunity for renewal.

### *Our Working Group*

The working group was set up when the concern was adopted, at was not originally given any terms of reference:

"We envisage that the terms of reference of this group will be finalised as the structure of their activities becomes more defined."

In October 2015, the lack of clear direction for the group was still a problem:

"We recognize that deciding how the Mental Wellbeing Concern Group should work towards the concern has been very challenging, perhaps more so than we as a meeting anticipated."

In February 2016, a clear task was adopted by the working group - the survey on how YFGM contributed to, and challenged, the mental wellbeing of its members; but this increase in direction was accompanied by a loss of close connection between the working group and the life of the meeting as a whole.

We can choose to retain the working group, or to wind it down, whether or not we lay down our Concern. If we choose to retain it, however, we must be sure that we will, as a meeting, be willing and able to give it our support, not letting the group shoulder the concern on our behalf,

but each of us trying to bring what we can to our corporate witness.

"Meetings should beware of the risk of using the process of forwarding concerns to avoid their responsibilities."

We should also try to ensure that the working group is given clear direction. It is as a gathered meeting that we listen for the Light, and it must be out of the gathered meeting that our sense of the Spirit's guidance is be found and tested. If we wish to retain the group, we should have some fairly clear vision of the aims and scope of the work we ask it to undertake on our behalf.

Whether the group is retained or laid down, the work and witness of members of the group over the life of the Concern deserves to be marked and celebrated.