

QAADRANT

Autumn 2016

Quaker Action on Alcohol & Drugs



To be acknowledged, to be heard:

Voices from the QAAD Woodbrooke conference *pages 2-5 & 7*

Crosses and circles: a Friend reflects *page 6*



‘Making a Difference’: The 2016 QAAD Woodbrooke Conference

Some Friends who attended the conference as representatives of their Area Meetings have shared their reports with us, while others have kindly contributed their personal impressions. This edition of QAADRANT is their composite account...

Nearly 40 Friends met for QAAD’s 16th biennial conference at Woodbrooke from July 29th-31st. The weekend included workshops, small group sessions, an open Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) meeting (attended by 22 people), opportunities to share resources, two Meetings for Worship, and the traditional Saturday evening entertainment.

Introductions showed the diversity of those attending - all Quakers who included those wanting to learn more about addiction, professionals, AA and NA members and close relatives of those addicted. We were a mixed crowd, but the reason for being there was the same for each of us.

The keynote speaker was Professor Chris Cook

...of Durham university, an Anglican priest, psychiatrist and academic, who has researched and written about the nature of spirituality in the treatment of addiction for 30 years.

He began by explaining the continuum from non-use of alcohol or other drugs to

use, then problems and finally addiction, or dependence. He said alcohol was the most popular drug and it causes most problems, though addiction applies to other substances and even behaviours like gambling, computer games and so on; addiction takes on a life of its own, and he mentioned key indicators like compulsion and the prevalence of relapse. Tobacco is the biggest ‘gateway’ drug, leading many smokers into using other substances.

Chris said the connection between drugs and religious beliefs, practices and ritual goes back thousands of years and he quoted the story in Genesis of Noah who shamed his family with his drunkenness. Although people of faith are not immune from addiction, almost any kind of religious affiliation offers a degree of protection and helps people to avoid becoming addicts; e.g. research shows that young people committed to a religion are more likely to refuse drugs than their peers.

Chris spoke of the impact of AA, founded in 1935 and the first and best known of all the Anonymous fellowships, in linking spirituality with the treatment of addiction. Today’s membership includes people of all religious beliefs, atheists and agnostics. Nearly half the members are women.

Of spirituality Chris noted that there were numerous and diverse definitions of the experience - it may vary with context, is multi-dimensional, subjective and social, immanent and transcendent – and it gives

meaning and purpose to people’s lives whether they are religious or not. Spirituality is important in overcoming addiction and has crossed over into the treatment of other problems, like depression, where more and more papers on, for example, the efficacy of mindfulness are published each year. To those who say the study of spirituality is unscientific he said the relationship between spirituality and addiction is borne out by research, and spirituality should be an important consideration in all treatment programmes.

I learned a great deal...

Although aware of the existence of QAAD for some years, the conference was my first encounter with Quaker Action on Alcohol and Drugs. The reasons I went were, frankly, wanting to be at Woodbrooke that weekend and knowing how judgemental I felt towards addicts. Therefore I decided to become informed so I could understand people in that type of situation. I learned a great deal and changed my attitude at this extraordinarily intense weekend.

Some participants were recovering drug/alcohol /gambling addicts. Their testimonies were hugely influential on me and I am grateful, especially, for the individual conversations I had. Besides the professionals who also came and interested outsiders like myself, “close others” were present. This phrase alludes to anyone closely associated with an addict. A number of mothers plus an aunt took part and got support from one another. Many had attended the biennial conference several times in its 16 year history.

I had felt exposed saying in the introductory

session that the reason I had come was to stop being judgemental, but much relieved when the mother of an addict told me she struggles with her own feelings in that way. I also learned something of the choices that family members make - for instance, whether to withhold financial support in order not to feed a habit. With that goes the pain of watching a loved one struggle, and an addict in the family can break a marriage. The whole family is disrupted.

I picked up little about what prompts people’s addictions and the emotions involved, more about the dangers to life.

Lastly but not least, Quaker charities in general attend to the needs of those outside The Religious Society of Friends. This one is solely for those within it, as well as being geared to research and policy-making. It is very common for people to put on a front about our lives. Observing, it was clearly a relief all round for attendees to let their guard down.

What makes a difference? To be acknowledged, to be heard...

There were small groups throughout the weekend which gave us all opportunity to introduce ourselves and listen to each other’s experiences.

We all learned a lot, made friends and exchanged addresses and details so we could continue to keep in touch.

What a great sense of safety and non-judgement this conference provides...

I never cease to be amazed by the warmth of understanding and acceptance by everybody.

What makes a difference to me, and I know to others when I give the same, is to be acknowledged, to be heard...

The Workshops at the Conference...

There were four workshops at the conference. Here are some recollections from each...

Close others

...the biggest draw for me was the anonymously-led close others' group ... This was where it was explained how difficult it could be for those living with a practising/recovering addict to talk about their deepest hurts and emotions in a safe environment. The sharing at

this group, where those who attended knew there would be no gossip, criticism or judgement on what was said or by whom, made this the meeting of the conference for me. This workshop and sharing was invaluable to me...

Women Only Provision - Women's Independent Alcohol Service

Patsy Staddon shared information about the WIAS, which provides mutual support groups in Bristol and a weekly telephone helpline service.

Patsy shared an alarming statistic - that "16% of UK women are known to have alcoholic disorders", but the thought that "most recover without treatment" was reassuring. But women do have different problems; the shaming is damaging and the shame is worse than it is for men. And there are linked problems: abuse and possibly vulnerable children and young adults at risk.

From previous experience and reading I have become aware of the patriarchal lilt of some recovery programmes and the lack of perceived confidentiality. This is very distressing and is not just a gender issue as it can deeply affect other individuals and minority groups who feel persecuted and isolated, especially if they are in threatening, abusive and/or violent families or relationships. The WIAS website is at www.wiaswomen.org.uk/index.html telephone number 0117-942-8077

Resistance to Spiritual Connections

Tim James, a trustee of QAAD led a workshop on the ways in which spiritual connection can be resisted, and enabled.

Fake it to make it", is an AA term used when a newcomer has not any belief outside themselves (ego), much as I didn't when I first arrived at AA. Next I had "willingness" i.e. all that's required to start with, prior to faith. Lastly I had "ego

collapse at depth", which I think were the words Tim James used, as being the necessary starting point for recovery - utter humility, I suppose.

An interesting quotation that emerged at this workshop was: "We are not human beings having a spiritual experience. We are spiritual beings having a human experience". (Pierre Teilhard de Chardin). I found that comforting and reassuring.

Poetry, football, drama and ballroom dancing: Alcohol Concern's Communities Together project

Marc Mordey of Alcohol Concern Wales led a workshop about an innovative project for alcohol harm reduction. We are glad to be able to make this information more widely available to Friends. Marc writes...

'Communities Together' is a 3 year (2014 - 2017) community development project that is taking place in the twin towns of Fishguard and Goodwick in north Pembrokeshire. The project encourages people to talk about the good and bad sides of alcohol use in their lives and their neighbourhoods, identify local alcohol issues, and develop their own solutions.

Our approach draws on the thinking of Dr Harold Holder, who urged "the well-intentioned people who introduce [alcohol harm] prevention programmes into communities", to engage with them, relinquish control, and be prepared for things to happen in "unexpected ways". [i] Poetry, football, drama, and ballroom dancing have been some of the unexpected outcomes of our project.

'Communities Together' is about "us who drink" (most of the adult population), not about "those problem drinkers over there". It does not aim to discourage alcohol use altogether, rather to promote healthy relationships with alcohol. Involvement is open to all members of the community, and we welcome people with a wide range of experiences and views on alcohol issues.

We wanted to realise the Welsh Government's Prudent Healthcare principle of "achieving health and wellbeing...as equal partners through co-production," so we used a range of consultation methods

to seek the views of local people and set the priorities for the project. In line with this, we also took an asset-based community development ('ABCD') approach, which seeks to identify the "assets" already present in the community rather than deficiencies or needs. These may be obvious things like buildings and facilities, or less tangible things like people's skills and enthusiasms.

We drew on these assets to undertake with the community activities that included a theatre event followed by a discussion on alcohol, project work with older school children, poetry evenings, and events that brought older and younger people in the community together. Some events were clearly focussed on alcohol issues, others promoted socialising without alcohol, or involved events where alcohol was available but not a focus.

More generally, activities were about building connections and skills. We also established the place of our project in the community, by making clear that we were there for the community, not simply in order to get them round to our way of thinking.

The evaluation indicates that participation in the project helps people by: boosting self-confidence; by reducing social isolation and fragmentation, particularly by bringing different generations together; and by creating the idea that there is a big pool of talents and enthusiasms in the local area, not just problems and unmet needs.

All of these can be factors in building resilience against alcohol misuse and other problems. It is not clear as yet whether quantifiable outcomes in terms of improved drinking patterns and reduced alcohol-related ill-health will result.

In 2008, the World Health Organisation's "Closing the gap in a generation" [ii] report argued that enabling people to achieve

more control over their own lives is a means of health promotion. The more challenging flipside of this is that someone else may have to relinquish some control. That may include people like us, the ‘well-intentioned’ people working in alcohol prevention, whom Holder describes. This relinquishing

From crosses to circles

Chris Bemrose of Bognor Regis Meeting responds to an earlier article in QAADRANT

In his article in QAADRANT for Spring 2016, Colin Tickner wrote about the magic of circles: in the circles of Stonehenge and Avebury; in therapeutic circles, including circles of those affected by addiction; in meals around circular tables; and in Quaker meetings, for example.

I am struck by the way that nature largely reveals itself in circles and spheres. Planets and stars are not only spherical, but follow largely circular or elliptical courses. Molecules and cells are largely spherical, as are many flowers. Raindrops are spherical and create concentric rings when they land on lakes or ponds. Trees and plants have circular trunks and stems. Eyes – for most of us the most significant of our senses – are spherical too.

There is a sense of perfection and democracy about the circle. The circle is eternal – no beginning and no end. Each point of the circle is also exactly the same distance from the centre. As such, it is a symbol of equality, wholeness and completeness.

By contrast, the cross is a symbol of what it is

of control can be a scary, risky strategy, but we have found that it can bring some remarkable outcomes.

[i] Holder, H. (1998) *Alcohol and the community: a systems approach to prevention*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

[ii] Commission on Social Determinants of Health (2008) *Closing the gap in a generation: health equity through action on the social determinants of health*, World Health Organisation (WHO), Geneva.

to be human. Crosses do not generally appear in nature. They are invariably manmade. In a post Christian culture we may still associate the cross with the crucifix. We also use the cross as a symbol for ourselves: when we vote, it is invariably with the sign of a cross. In everyday terms we see crosses in signs saying ‘road closed’, ‘cross roads’ or against incorrect answers in an exercise book.

Over the last year or so I have developed and conducted a meditation – including at the Yearly Meeting Gathering in Bath - in which I invite people, Christian and non-Christian, individually and in groups, to tie two pieces of wood together, usually in the form of a cross, and to reflect on what it may mean for their lives. The answers are invariably personal and I do not ask people to reveal their reflections. However, I know that for many, the simple act of tying a cross brings to mind the things that they struggle with in life: difficult relationships, illnesses or disabilities, addictions or painful experiences from the past, for example. For others, it brings to mind particular responsibilities – to partners, children or significant others.

A question that arises from these workshops is whether and how we can transform our crosses into circles. The starting point here is acceptance. It is only once we begin to accept something that we really begin to engage and work with it in order to transform it. Otherwise we are in denial. It is not

easy: it requires both courage to face what is difficult, and faith and hope to keep on working and trusting that we will find a way through. In this, the cross can be a symbol of the ‘I’ crossed out: negating our egos. By contrast, the circle can be seen as a symbol of emptiness, waiting to be filled by the new. It is in this way that we can all, perhaps, move from a form of death –self-denial – to resurrection and new life.

Afterword

Yveline Arnaud of Finchley Quaker Meeting shares a final perspective on the QAAD Woodbrooke conference of 2016

It takes time to learn to embrace the silence, time in silence, bearing it, tolerating it.

Time when thoughts tumble about while the head’s washing machine keeps rolling on.

It takes time to learn to enjoy the silence, to rest in it, to absorb its peace.

It takes time to receive from the Spirit, time to hush one’s spirit, time to unwind and empty it, time to make a vacuum for that Comforter. It takes time to invite It, time to wait for It.

Just so, it took time to appreciate what was offered at the Woodbrooke QAAD Conference on Making a Difference. Fretting on arrival, the mind still full of the busyness of everyday life, a bit afraid of all the unknown faces, self-conscious – did I just say the wrong thing? – then, small meetings helping, progressively relaxing, discovering souls behind faces, and allowing myself to love; the time came to flow and enjoy life to the point when coming into the dining room gave the rush of perceiving each one as truly precious.

In this context, I like the way that the Celtic cross combines both the cross and the circle. It reminds me that it is possible to combine the human and the divine, the broken and the whole, the temporal and the eternal.

Chris Bemrose designs and leads experiences to help people reflect on organisational and spiritual questions. Details at workingfromtheheart.org.uk

One of the blessings of this time in Woodbrooke is to be separated from things – most of our things, things that tie us down – and occupations. Simplicity is offered here, though the environment is rich. People are allowed to become more important than things or the apparatus of the digital age. Individuals in a group are revealed each as important, not just a face but what’s behind. The soul gets shown a bit, and it is a pleasure to behold.

On top of being informative, the conference and the general non-judgmental atmosphere conveyed by the subject of Making a Difference had a healing effect, and made a difference to us first. That was reflected on the countenance of some participants, who had arrived with a frown on their faces and left with a smile and a lighter step.

Woodbrooke thanks

We would like to thank all of the speakers, workshop leaders, and participants for their contributions. We also welcomed the various suggestions and ideas that participants contributed verbally and in written form during the plenary session. We will incorporate them in our planning discussions for future gatherings.

The work of the staff at Woodbrooke both before and during the event was much appreciated.



Mutual Support, Advocacy, Networking, Speaking for Friends, Working with other faiths

Addiction is a massive problem, but QAAD makes a difference.

Financial support from individuals, Meetings, and Trusts enables us to continue with our work.

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Have you looked at the QAAD website recently?

www.qaad.org

Please visit it for information about QAAD, news of events for Friends, and details of our public issues work.

Gambling matters

QAAD has received relatively few personal enquiries about gambling problems from Friends, but a couple of participants at the Woodbrooke conference raised questions about help and support if this is experienced.

We would be interested to hear from any Friends who have been affected by gambling either personally, or who would be interested in writing for QAADRANT on the subject. The views of young Friends on gambling and how it is considered within their social groups would be particularly welcome.

QAAD continues to make contributions in the policy field as regards gambling, along with other faith-based groups.

Letters and articles for QAADRANT are very welcome, and should be sent to Helena Chambers, 21 Church Street, Tewkesbury, Gloucestershire GL20 5PD. t: 01684 299247 e: helenaqaad@hotmail.com