

QUAKER BELIEF IN SOUTH LONDON

What do Friends believe in Purley and Sutton Monthly Meeting? The idea of finding out came from the Tuesday Group that meets weekly in Sutton Meeting (see *Minds and Hearts*, Autumn 1994). We first spent an evening drawing up a suitable questionnaire. This of course is bound to be an exercise that provokes strong debate and forces us to commit ourselves to firm decisions: what questions do we regard as the most critical or discriminating? Have we been careful to word them in a way that does not lead to a particular answer? Have we adequately covered the area of faith that we regard as Quaker? But we managed it. The agreed questions covered our view of God, Jesus, Christianity, prayer and the after-life.

What about the pervasive unwillingness of Quakers to answer Yes or No to a simple question? We left this open: 'Please write Yes or No or a word that indicates the strength of your convictions'. This of course creates difficulties in adding up the results for those who want simple statistics, but it evokes truer responses and that is what we were after.

A questionnaire of this sort is useful both to the askers and to the responders. The responders are encouraged to think for a few minutes about some key questions and then to commit themselves to answers. We were gratified to discover how Friends warmed to this exercise: in Sutton Meeting 33 out of 45 questionnaires were returned, and some Friends positively sought the opportunity to fill it in.

What of the responses? Within this suburban London Friends' meeting the diversity of thought in the Society of Friends was well illustrated. Many Friends were able to affirm strongly their consciousness of the spirit of God pervading all things. Most were happy to use the word 'God' in describing their faith. Almost all indicated that they pray at some times and in some ways. The belief that there are many ways to God was almost universal. Belief in the uniqueness of the Bible as a source of religious truth was not common, and in view of the many study evenings that we have had in Sutton on modern aspects of Biblical analysis it was hardly surprising that the only question that received a unanimous response was one that allowed the affirmation that the Bible needs to be interpreted in the light of Biblical research. The humanness of Jesus was widely accepted. Most respondents were glad that the Society of Friends is within the Christian Church.

Perhaps most interesting was the response to the opportunity for write-in comments: "What aspect of your faith is most important to you?" Space does not allow these to be summarised, but here is one brief extract:

"I believe God suffers with us and shares our joys. God has a great sense of humour and will be chuckling to Godself about this questionnaire."

G. Gordon Steel