

Fieldwork Report

The Central Leeds Quaker Meeting House

For my fieldwork research I chose to visit the Central Leeds Quaker Meeting House on the 24th of November 2013. The methodology I used was mixture of participant observation and informal interview with some of the worshippers. The reason I chose to visit the Quakers church was because I have been as atheist my whole life and the only times when I have come into contact with religion has usually been with the Christianity, in particular the Church of England and Catholicism. So I was intrigued as to why I might have had so little experience and knowledge of the Quakers, being a Christian denomination and I felt that out of all the major religions I had the greatest knowledge and experience of Christianity. This meant that the main questions I was interested in were; how the Quaker church is involved in the wider community, how connected it is with modern life, how it is transmitted to different generations and how my expectation of the experience differed from the experience itself. In this report I will describe the process of carrying the visit and analyse how I carried out my observation. I will also address my key issues and questions.

Before I went on my fieldwork visit I decided to briefly read up on the history of the Quaker movement and how it begun, however I decided not to research the nature of a Quaker service because I did not want make any judgements before my visit. The Quakers begun as a new church movement in the 1650s, it was a contrast from the dominant Christian churches at the time as it did not have a fixed leader or a regimented spiritual hierarchy (dandelion, 2008). The Quaker was quite radical in the way that it advocated equality for men and women, a strong moral standpoint, non violence and pacifism (dandelion, 2008). The idea of pacifism is a constant them in the Quaker faith, some of the most famous examples could be Quakers who conscientiously objected during the world war despite receiving abuse. The theme was evident in the meeting which I visit because in the entrance hall there was an anti war poster board. As well as this after the meeting they advertised to the congregation that there was a copy of Peace News, a pacifist magazine that has links to the Quakers, available for reading

On the day of my fieldwork visit I arrived half an hour before their 10:45am Sunday service in order to introduce myself to the people charge and so I get an initial sense of the meeting house. Almost instantly I was put at ease by their open and friendly attitude, at the door I was greeted by a woman who shook my hand and welcomed me in. I also noticed that everyone

was greeted at the door so it was not just because I was an outside and a guest; this immediately suggested to me that these Quakers formed a warm and welcoming community and that it was not just politeness to a guest but the normal practice. I was spoken to at length by the gentlemen in charge about the church and the service that I was about to sit in on and I was invited to stay after for further activities. This again gave me the impression that the members of this particular Quaker church were part of a tight knit community, but that it was not exclusive. The activities after the service were a tea and coffee, a talk and a soup lunch would be provided later and throughout the week there seemed to be lots of group activities like film nights and study groups. This suggests that this Quaker meeting house is more than a place of worship but that it is also a social gathering that is part of your everyday life, not just a church service you go to once a week.

I established in the previous paragraph that there seemed to be a strong sense of community within the Quaker church that I visited, so this leads on nicely to my question of how much the Quaker church involves itself in the wider community and modern day issues. I got the impression that this particular Quaker meeting house was quite active in the field of human rights and was inclined towards pacifism and anti war issues. This was shown by the fact that after the service two members were doing a talk about their recent visit to an economics and human rights conference in Brussels, this suggests that current affairs are at the forefront of this Quaker community and it is important to know these issues and to play an active role in the wider community. Furthermore on the Central Leeds Quakers website there is an article with photos about some Leeds Quakers protesting against nuclear tridents, in Leeds city centre. This suggests that not only are the Quakers interested in current affairs but they could spread their views to the youth and the general population using modern technology, like the internet.

However I saw no evidence of this as at the meeting, as I noted that the majority of people were middle aged. This is supported by the 2011 ONS census which shows that the most common age group, for Quaker membership, was 60 to 65 year olds and this was almost double the membership for 16 to 30 year olds. This suggests that that the Quaker population may not be growing as it seems not to be being transmitted to the younger generations. On the other hand at the service there were several children who do separate activities while the adults had their service and then they showed the adults what it was that they were doing. This could possibly suggest that the Quaker faith is being transmitted successfully to children but that there may be a loss of connection with adolescence and young adults. This could be

explained by the idea of period effects (Crockett, 2006, 567), period effects means to say that over a significant period in history there was a sudden change in religion affiliation and church attendance. So relating this back to the Quakers it could be argued that at the end of the 20th century there was an increase in scientific evidence which countered religious ideas, meaning that people between the ages of 16 to 30 may have turned away from religion all together. So that might explain why there were so few young people at the meeting house when I visited and why this theme was reflected in the 2011 census.

The first question I asked myself before the visit was what I expected from the experience and so afterwards I asked myself how what actually happen differed from my expectations. I found that general atmosphere of the place and the service was much more relaxed then I thought it would be, I thought it would be similar to Protestantism or Catholicism in having a clearly set our rules and code of practise. The first instance of this was when I was given leaflets about the Quakers and about the kind of rules they live by. In the leaflet the rules were called advice, using the word advice suggests to me that there are no rigid rules for how to behave and that they do not force you to behave in a particular way, this seems quite different from rules like the Ten Commandments which seem more set in stone. This does seem to suggest that the Quakers church is quite different from my expectations, however I should still be aware that I have only visited one Quaker church, so my findings cannot be generalized to the whole Quaker population, my observation only really tells me about this particular Quaker meeting house. Nevertheless it does give me an idea of what being a member of the Quaker church entails and so would be a good foundation for further research. Overall I came aware from my visit thinking that though Quakers are of Christian denomination their beliefs are still quite different compared to other Christian church and to what I was expecting.

Another aspect that different from what I anticipated was the service; my assumption was that there would be the leader of the church reading from sacred text to the congregation, the reality however was different. For this fieldwork assignment I was carrying out a participant observation meaning that I would take part in the service as well as observe it. So a few minutes before the service begun we all entered the room and sat down, in the room the chairs and benches were arranged in a circular shape with a table in the middle. The service itself lasted for one hour and it entailed everyone sitting down in silence, I was told that the purpose of this is for everyone to have a shared group experience of God. There seemed no particular etiquette as there did not seem to be any particular thing you were meant to do in

this time except for being respectful. For example I observed that during this experience some people sat with their heads bowed, some had their eyes shut and some people read. This reinstated my initial impression that the Quaker philosophy is relaxed and does not have rigid rules for how to act.

I conducted informal interviews with some of the other members and I found out that that silence is not a strict rule as you are allowed to speak if you feel compelled to say something from the heart. I asked one worshipper approximately how often someone will speak in one of these services and they said about seventy percent of the time. As this is a high percentage it led me to wonder as to whether my presence at the service had any effect on people willingness to speak. This is because I carried out an overt observation meaning that I made it clear to the Quakers the purpose of my visit, the reason for this is that it would have been unethical because in covert operations you cannot give informed consent (Bryman, 2008, p406). So I was obliged to carry out an overt study but one disadvantage of this is the idea of 'reactivity' (Bryman, 2008, p406), this means that people may modify their behaviour if they know they are being observed. So it is possible that some of the people in the congregation felt self conscious about speaking during the service because I was present and I am an outsider. This brings up another methodological issue of what effect being an outsider had on my observation. One issue being that it may not be possible to completely understand the Quaker practise without being a believer and an insider and also it is possible that the worshipper will only feel comfortable revealing their true feeling in front of insiders. So this could mean that my observation is a little one dimensional because I am only writing from a non Quaker viewpoint.

Overall I observed that the Quaker service and practise are quite different my expectations that it would be similar to a Church of England service. I observed from my research that the Quaker church sees political and social issues as very significant, like anti war protests and the current economic climate. Therefore this means that the church has to be connected with the wider community and modern life, so the issue can be discussed within the Quaker community. I observed from the use of their website that they are starting to use modern technology to get their strong moral views across. My visit to the Quaker meeting house was very interesting as it introduced to a completely new type of worship which I had no previous experience of and it opened my eyes to the difference between churches. I observed throughout, a constant community theme and a strong social aspect in this Quaker church.

Word=1990

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