

Quakers in Europe: Richard Seebohm

The Quaker movement (or Religious Society of Friends) began in the religious turbulence of seventeenth century England. As practised in this country it has kept its defining features. These include experiential Christianity ('the inner light'), silent worship, freedom from (sorry, I mean absence of) paid clergy, and 'testimonies' of peace, equality, simplicity and truth. These features, together with a robustly spirit-led business method and a fit-for-purpose organisational structure ensured its survival but kept it as a minority denomination.

Outside Europe, Quakerism followed the British colonial diaspora, particularly to North America. There it met varied versions of Christian culture, which led to growth of programmed worship, paid pastors and an evangelical approach. Whilst the traditional form also flourished, the fundamentalist, mission-oriented, version was exported to central Africa (not a promising location for silent worship) and Latin America. It has since flourished in both.

This is not to say that the early British Quakers, and in particular those who travelled in continental Europe, were not missionaries. It was such a group in 1790 who came upon a North German community that had broken away from the Lutheran Church to worship in silence. Its members needed little in the way of convincement; I happen to be a direct descendant. Such isolated Quaker groups survived but did not spread. It was in relief to the victims of wars and political turmoil that British Friends (but not only British) were led by their testimonies to practice what they preached in many troubled European countries, and over many years. (After the first world war ended in

November 1918 they had to step in when the Allies kept the blockade of Germany in place over the winter.) This exposure attracted attention and adherents. The wider peace movement also brought us together with kindred spirits.

The attached list shows that no significant European country now lacks a Quaker presence. There are some 16,000 in Britain (plus several thousand more attending Meetings for Worship but not in membership), 1,600 in Ireland (North and South), over 300 in Germany, though fewer in each of the other territories. But the numbers do not necessarily indicate a lack of visibility. What is important is that each national group is autonomous in the sense of not looking to any central body for validation. However, there is a 'Friends World Committee for Consultation', which is what it says, and this has a Europe and Middle East Section (EMES). It is EMES that is the primary contact with CEC.

Because of its mass, Britain Yearly Meeting is able to deploy administrative staff who (for example) run the World Council of Churches' Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme for Palestine and Israel (EAPPI). It appoints staff to the Quaker United Nations Office (QUNO) in Geneva. But its international focus of concern is not specifically European.

For that, there is the Quaker Council for European Affairs in Brussels. This is independent of other Quaker bodies and is steered by a Council drawn from nine European Quaker groups. It has two Representatives, three short-term Programme Assistants and an Office Manager. It has programmes in the fields of peace, human

rights and economic justice, and a more general monitoring and communication role linked to the future evolution of the European continent. It pays considerable attention to the work of the Council of Europe, where (arguably) faith dimensions have more prominence than in the EU. To see more, visit www.quaker.org/qcea

Quaker Yearly Meetings/Groups in Europe and the Middle East

Austria Quarterly Meeting (of German YM)

Belgium and Luxembourg Monthly Meeting

Britain Yearly Meeting

Bulgaria

Czech Republic: Prague Worship Group

Denmark Yearly Meeting

Dubai

East Croatia Worship Group

Egypt

Estonia

Finland Yearly Meeting

France Yearly Meeting

Georgia Worship Group

German Yearly Meeting

Greece (Athens Christian Friends Meeting)

Hungary: Budapest Worship Group

Iceland: Kópavogur Worship Group

Ireland Yearly Meeting

Italy

Latvia

Lithuania: Kaunas Quaker Group

Middle East Yearly Meeting

Netherlands Yearly Meeting

Norway Yearly Meeting

Russia: Moscow Monthly Meeting

Spain: Barcelona Monthly Meeting

Sweden Yearly Meeting

Switzerland Yearly Meeting