



Dear Friends

"Are we making a difference?" It's a question I occasionally raise with the Committee and staff of UQSC. Every time the answer comes back, loud and clear, YES. The work at Quaker Cottage and at Maghaberry Prison is playing an important, if not crucial part, in supporting families in need.

As with last year the Appeal Newsletter has examples of how our service users feel about our work. Sarah's story at the Cottage demonstrates how a year can make a difference in someone's life, not just to Sarah but for her children as well. There are many stories like Sarah's. We work with up to 27 new families each year but the waiting list remains as long as ever. Poverty and deprivation are endemic in parts of Belfast and today's society has left a significant group of families socially excluded from many of the opportunities that we take for granted.

The work at the Prison continues to grow

with the increase in the prison population. There are now almost 800 prisoners in Maghaberry a growth of some 200 over the past 7 years or so. The prison authorities have reinforced their commitment to our work by encouraging us to consider new outreach programmes to support families and maintain the links for prisoners. Services like these make a difference.

The statutory authorities without exception commend and support our work with families. We are encouraged to "break new ground" in the search for ways of helping those in such need. All of this, of course, means we need to keep appealing for funds.

Your response year after year has been exceptional. I can only hope that as you read the newsletter you will feel that this is a worthwhile cause.

Thank you for your continuing generosity and support.

Roy Blair
Chairman

In this Issue

Moving On

Why I became involved with UQSC

Thoughts on Quaker Care

The Silent Sentence

Quaker Cottage teenagers programme

They showed me love big time

Our vision is to promote a society where individuals and families can reach their potential.

Our ethos is informed by Quakerism. The belief in a divine presence in each of our lives is the basis of Friends' concern for peace and social justice and is the prime mover for us establishing various services. This fundamental belief leads us to value the worth and individual potential of each person.

Christmas Hamper Project

Betty McElnea who has been involved in the work of the Committee since the late 1970's reminded us of the ongoing impact of the Cottage, for example, by our annual hamper appeal. She said "It is wonderful that families whose lives were touched by Quaker Cottage years ago are still remembered each year by the hamper appeal. It is these small, continuous signs of genuine love and concern that make a lasting impact on the lives of numerous people who have attended the Cottage over the past 25 years."

Each December, the staff and volunteers at Quaker Cottage collect food and gifts from local Meetings and Friends School Lisburn that enable us to distribute hampers to some of the neediest families in North and West Belfast. Last year we had a fantastic response and 140 hampers were delivered.

Friends often also provide small gifts appropriate for the mothers of the

families who we are trying to support such as toiletries or fancy sweets. It is hard to imagine but for many the small gifts that we supply are the only ones that some mothers will receive at Christmas. One woman currently attending the Cottage told us recently that each year she will try to buy some small things for herself and then she wraps them up and labels them as if they had been bought for her from her children and from her mother. These are put under the tree and they are all that she has to look forward to on Christmas morning. Grant McCullough, Manager of the Cottage said "It will be a pleasure for us to make sure that this year she will have at least one surprise present".

We would like to take this opportunity to thank all F/friends who faithfully donate non-perishables and other gifts each year to make this project possible.



Moving on – a story of the impact of Quaker Cottage on one woman's life

Sarah's first day at Quaker cottage could so easily have been her last. She wasn't long into the day-centre's group-work room when she made it very clear that it was unlikely that this was going to suit her – and if she didn't like the place then she wouldn't be back. I began to wonder why she had come – was she here to please someone else, possibly her referrer? This is something we try to avoid and in our first sessions we emphasise with participants that they should be motivated to meet their own needs while here and they should not come to please or impress anyone else. Sarah went on to tell us that she had previously been to several other centres and that she had never attended them more than twice. It was significant then to find that someone, who had fixed their exit strategy in place on arrival, attended 78 out of a possible 80 days – missing only two for hospital appointments. Sarah felt safe at the cottage.

Most days at Quaker Cottage we have a very informal agenda – we find that by responding to the needs presented by participants, we not only show them respect but we are better able to address their most critical issues. However on the very first day it is a little different as there are some formalities we need to explain. We tell them what they might expect during their year on the programme, we talk about confidentiality, find out about children's allergies etc.

Then, after about the third cup of tea, we might ask if anyone in the group would like to share why they are here today. This simple question has led to us listening to some of the most remarkable life stories imaginable. This day was no exception and 2 or 3 of the women had voluntarily disclosed, in intimate detail, the more traumatic and distressing times in their lives that had brought them to a point where they felt the need for external support and guidance. Sarah sat next to the last woman to speak and became flushed as it was clear that she should be next to share. After her earlier declaration it would have been no surprise if she had chosen not to speak – but she did.

It would be unfair to tell all of her story but it is fair to say that she had suffered a life of almost intolerable poverty, of physical and sexual abuse as a child and of being brought through the troubles, as a pacifist, within a household where her father and 3 of her brothers served time for paramilitary crimes. In the year she attended we heard many stories of just what it was like to live within such a home. As an adult, life was still presenting major challenges. Both of her children have special needs, one severely autistic, and Sarah herself has a serious medical condition. She also cares for her disabled mother and survives living with a partner who suffers from depression.

Despite all these challenges Sarah manages to meet the demands on her

time very well. However the experiences of her childhood years still haunted her and put pressures on her own mental health. At Quaker Cottage we often offer extra time to someone with multiple or complex issues and Sarah agreed to attend individual counselling sessions in the afternoons as well as her regular morning group sessions. Our childcare staff were able to care for her children to facilitate this focused work. Soon Sarah began to gain a better understanding of her feelings, to have a more positive outlook on life and to look at alternative ways of coping with her situation.

Sarah finished at the cottage a year ago and the truth is that many of the difficulties she faces in life still remain. But she has a new optimism about life and she now knows how to find and take help and support when she needs it. She also enjoys simple wholesome pleasures – like walking up Cavehill with her children or doing craftwork at home, things she first experienced and enjoyed during her time at the cottage. On another level she has been proactive about taking care of unfinished business that had been adversely affecting her own self worth. Just two weeks ago she phoned to let us know that she had pressed charges against a man who had abused her as a child. He had made a confession to police and a court case is to follow. I could feel the swell of pride that she enjoyed in telling this news and I knew that I was talking to a woman who had moved on remarkably from the first day we had met.

Grant McCullough
Quaker Cottage Manager

Why I became involved with UQSC

– by Pleasaunce Perry, Committee member

I first became involved with Quaker Service work as a teenager. My Sunday School teacher, Doris Fay, used to run summer play schemes at Frederick Street Meeting and I helped there occasionally. The next step was to apply to become part of a Quaker work camp. There were several of these in the early



seventies in Belfast, and the one I joined was held in Ballymurphy running a summer scheme for the children of the area. We did craft work with them and played games and took them on bus trips. It certainly

opened my eyes to lives that were very different to my own childhood, and to the religious divides that existed in my city. The work now that Quaker Cottage is able to do is invaluable in helping meet the vast needs that are out there.

At about the same time, my mother became a volunteer at the first visitors' canteen at the Long Kesh Internment camp, which later became the Maze Prison. I have a memory of those basic facilities and it gives me great satisfaction to see how the work has developed to provide the level of services that are currently at Maghaberry Prison.

As I have a full time job as a District Nursing Sister, my volunteering opportunities are limited, but I was delighted to become a member of the Service Committee as it enables me to stay involved with the work.



Thoughts on Quaker Care

by Rosemary A Calvert, shop volunteer.

Let me attempt to describe the scene.....

A wet wintry evening in December on the Lisburn Road in Belfast.

Two women Friends cross, in opposite directions, the pedestrian crossing close to 'Quaker Care'... one of the two UQSC charity shops in Belfast.

The 'green man sign' is displayed, the traffic has stopped and the two shop volunteers head across toward each other, their faces light up (despite the rain and cold), they smile, exchange cheery friendly greetings, pass each other and go on their way.... one having just completed her afternoon stint in the shop and the other just about to begin (as it is late night shopping prior to Christmas).

As Christians and Quakers we are challenged all the time by the need and distress in the world around us. The Quaker Care shops raise funds for the support of the work undertaken at Quaker Cottage with mothers and children, and as shop volunteers we have a part to play in that programme of work. Few activities in

life operate in isolation and this is true of the fundraising which we carry out.

As Friends we believe that all of life is sacred and our time behind the counter, sorting donated goods or chatting with customers, are all undertaken to the glory of God and as part of our worship and service.

How very important are the smile, the friendly greeting and the cheery words as we meet and pass one another in life.



The Silent Sentence

The Monica Barritt Visitor Centre is based at HMP Maghaberry, where UQSC has provided a service for prisoners' families and friends since 1988. We provide practical and emotional support, café facilities and playroom facilities inside and outside the Prison as well as a non-directive counselling service at the Centre.

Often our first contact with family and friends of prisoners is over the phone. Some people will have practical questions that need answering:

'How do we go about booking a visit?'

'How do I get to Maghaberry? I don't have a car.'

'What can I bring?'

These questions are easily answered by our staff in a helpful and courteous manner and some visitors use the opportunity to talk about the circumstances that have led to a son or partner's arrest. We listen and give support to these callers, as this may be the first time that they have had a chance to talk about how they are feeling.

Some people do not make contact with us over the phone, but arrive into our Centre in a state of shock, confusion, or agitation. We witness on a daily basis the impact that imprisonment has on a family and the repercussions that it has for

partners and children. It has been called "the silent sentence".

Many young mothers arrive at the Prison already feeling stressed out after an exhausting journey. Travelling across Northern Ireland by public transport, with two or three young children in tow, is a far from ideal way of preparing for a visit. We would encourage these women to sit with us over a cup of tea while their children burn off some energy with our childcare workers in the crèche area. This allows the mother a chance to catch her breath before visiting. It also allows her an opportunity to talk openly about the things she may not be able to do any other time.

Many visitors sacrifice their own basic needs to provide for a loved one in Prison, but this pressure often puts even the most loving and stable relationships under huge strain. Let's consider Susan and John's situation (not their real names). Susan has been visiting her husband John for the last three years. He is currently serving a life sentence and he is likely to serve at least another six or seven years. Susan finds it difficult to make ends meet because John pressurises her to sign money into his account so that he can buy tobacco. He gives this tobacco to another inmate on his Prison wing who has threatened to make life difficult for John, and who is well known for bullying other inmates. Susan works two part time jobs, and rarely gets to go out with friends

or family. She spends practically no money on herself, and she tells us that her entire life revolves around HMP Maghaberry.

According to recent figures from the Prison Reform Trust, 45% of prisoners lose touch with their families during their sentence (usually within the first three months). There are many reasons for this, ranging from family members cutting off contact, self imposed isolation, through to mental health difficulties, or drink and drug problems. Unfortunately, in many instances, these inmates have no one else to visit them, and face a very lonely time ahead. UQSC and Prison Service have been in discussions about providing visiting opportunities from volunteers for these men. We hope to initiate this over the next number of months. In an effort to keep families together during a loved one's imprisonment, we are also in negotiations with the Prison Service to provide volunteers who could support the Family Support Officers in their work. They currently carry large caseloads, and volunteers could help them prioritise their workloads more effectively.

UQSC continues to strive to provide top quality support and facilities to our ever changing population of visitors. Each visitor has a story to tell and we do our best with the limited resources we have to support as many visitors as we can.

Michael Kelly
Visitors' Centre Manager

Quaker Care Online

Many people today prefer to do their shopping online and if this is you, why not take a moment and visit the Quaker Care Shopping Mall? The mall may be found at www.4rcharity.co.uk/quakercare. By shopping at Quaker Care online, you will be raising much needed funds for the work of UQSC at no extra cost to yourself.

Quaker Cottage teenagers programme.

The teenage programme has had a number of successful incarnations over the last few years but has maintained a core principle throughout. That has been to provide a safe place where young people can explore themes that contribute to their growth as individuals. We are a service for young people who are managing difficulties and traumatic experiences that would fill many adults with trepidation and fear. We do this in an environment where young people are not judged, castigated or shamed in any way. We do not use sanctions of any sort as we prefer to use reason. The primary essence of our approach is that of unconditional, positive regard sometimes known as love.

The success of this programme is difficult to measure, but I know that some of the teenagers who attend refuse to attend any other club or institution even at the behest of community support employees. I know that their attendance is regular and unsolicited and I know that they find it difficult to explain why it is that they come to Quaker Cottage. Despite this here are some of the things the teenagers have said about being part of the programme we run at the Cottage:

"it's good because we get to go away on trips and stuff"

"it's good comin' here because you can do whatever you want"

"I know if I needed to talk to somebody then I could do it at Quakers"

"you can say whatever you want and you know the leaders aren't gonna jump down your throat"

John Stevenson
Group Worker

"They showed me love big time"

"How do we transcend the cycles of violence that bewitch our human community, while still living in them?" Conflict Resolution practitioner, John Paul Lederach poses this question that is relevant for all of us from Quakers, social workers, police, politicians, teachers, etc. After completing research for an MA dissertation exploring the impact of Quaker Cottage, I believe that Quaker Cottage is one of these places that is practically living out what Lederach refers to as the 'moral imagination', "the capacity to imagine something rooted in the challenges of the real world yet capable of giving birth to that which does not yet exist."

Quaker Cottage offers a safe space for women and children to find support and healthy coping mechanisms for the very real challenges they face in their daily lives in North and West Belfast. After interviewing 13 women who finished the programme at Quaker Cottage from 1-5 years ago, I was struck by the lasting impact they spoke of in their lives. One of the women summed it up by saying, "They showed me love big time, and I didn't know what it was." All of the women spoke of experiencing trust, support, and acceptance and how this led to self-respect. As the women gained self-respect, a ripple effect impacted the lives of their children, local community, and cross community relationships. One woman stated, "I learnt self-respect. I learnt to respect me no matter what anybody else in the world thought of me. And I learnt to respect my kids for what they were." These words are powerful, and woman after woman spoke in similar terms. Social and health professionals were interviewed, and many stated how they saw remarkable



improvement in women's self-esteem and confidence and how that had a major influence on the whole family. Many also highlighted the need for more places at Quaker Cottage, that there are many families in need of just such a programme.

Through my research I found that the work of Quaker Cottage is often beyond words, it comes from a heart place. The women over and over described Quaker Cottage as a place where they could be accepted and at the same time where they were able to see alternative ways to challenge and deal with some of the cycles of violence they were experiencing in abusive relationships, addictions, community violence, or internal struggles with depression. This is the way in which I see Quaker Cottage living out the moral imagination, deeply rooted in the reality of daily life, yet creating a 'practice community' where women and children are able to experience and share trust, acceptance, support, and respect. When asked if she would recommend the programme to other women in a similar situation one woman said, "I would say don't miss it, just say yes. Go. They will support you in everyway possible. They give you everything you need. They give you your self-confidence back, they give you love, they make you feel warm. They help you find yourself again, so they do...when you feel lost, it is awful hard to find the right path to find friends again. And they are friends; they are friends you will never lose, that you will never want to lose. That is what I would say to them."

Christy Bischoff

Ulster Quaker Service Committee,
541 Lisburn Road,
Belfast, BT9 7GQ
Tel: 028 9020 1444
Fax: 028 9020 1881

www.ulsterquakerservice.com

Printed on paper made from 100%
post consumer waste