

CHELTENHAM QUAKER

MARCH 2009

MEETINGS FOR WORSHIP

Cheltenham: Sundays at 10:30. Children are always welcome in our Sunday meetings for worship. If during the hour parents feel it is appropriate, they can go with them to the children's room, where they will be joined by one of the children's meeting volunteers. Fifth Sunday shared lunch.

Thursdays, 12:30 to 1:00 Meeting for Worship, followed on First and Third Thursdays (5th and 19th) by shared lunch.

DIARY

(All of these meetings at the FMH unless otherwise stated)

February

Th 26 12.30 **Thursday Worship** for half an hour.
Sa 28 2.00 **Meeting for Worship** at USAF Base, Fairford, outside main gate, until 3.00

March

Su 1 11.30 **Local Meeting**
Mo 2 8.00 **Christians at Work:** Chris Barrell on "How the other half lives – reflections on the time spent with the people of Monza, Zambia", at the Cottages, Leckhampton Church
We 4 2.30 **Peace Group** at FMH. All welcome
Th 5 12.30 **First Thursday Worship** for half an hour, followed by Shared Lunch
Th 5 2.30 **Searchers** at FMH
Sa 7 2.00 **Area Meeting** at Cirencester
Su 8 7.00 **Circle Dancing**
Tu 10 10.30 **Ecumenical Prayer Group** at the White House, Gotherington Lane, Bishops Cleeve
Th 12 12.30 **Thursday Worship** for half an hour.
Su 15 12.00 **Meeting for Learning:** "Quaker Testimonies". Led by Philip Paull on "Peace"
Th 19 12.30 **Third Thursday Worship** for half an hour, followed by Shared Lunch
Th 26 12.30 **Thursday Worship** for half an hour.
Sa 28 2.00 **Meeting for Worship** at USAF Base, Fairford, outside main gate, until 3.00
Su 29 12.00 **Meeting** to celebrate the life of Peter Hazell, followed by Shared Lunch

April

We 1 2.30 **Peace Group** at FMH. All welcome
Th 2 12.30 **First Thursday Worship** for half an hour, followed by Shared Lunch
Su 5 11.30 **Local Meeting**
Th 9 12.30 **Thursday Worship** for half an hour
Su 12 2.00 **Area Meeting** at the Chipping Club Room, Wotton under Edge
Su 12 7.00 **Circle Dancing**
Tu 14 10.30 **Ecumenical Prayer Group** at the White House, Gotherington Lane, Bishops Cleeve
Th 16 12.30 **Third Thursday Worship** for half an hour, followed by Shared Lunch

Christians at Work, Monday 2nd March at 8.00 at the Cottages, Leckhampton Church

The speaker this month will be Chris Barrell on "How the other half lives – reflections on the time spent with the people of Monze, Zambia." Chris is a Catholic who has been involved in various voluntary/charitable organizations for many years. He was introduced to the charity Hands Around the World in 2001, and in 2003 first went to Zambia. Since then he has been back every year, and has to date spent a total of one and a half years working at the hospital and getting involved with other projects.

Roy Crompton

The Searchers

As many Friends will know, the planned meeting of the Searchers on February 5th was cancelled, and will be now held on Thursday, March 5th at the Meeting House. As mentioned in the last newsletter, the topic will be “Dilemmas of pacifism”, e.g. QF & P starting at para.24.21. However, from now on, we will not start on the posted topic until we have explored anything at the top of our minds such as world events, the last Meeting for Worship, etc.

Our meetings are informal and, as always, open to all.

Keith Oakey

Spring Supper, Saturday, 25th April.

Another warm meal and welcome awaits you at the Meeting House on Saturday, April 25th starting at 6 pm. We are suggesting donations of £5 or more for a two course meal – monies to go to the Gaza Appeal. Details will appear on the Meeting House notice board.

Margot Roe

Wilma Carson

Wilma Carson died on 13th January and the funeral took place on 29th January 2009.

At the crematorium, the previous cremation was over-running by about 20 minutes, so there was an opportunity in the waiting-room to greet the many friends who had come, some considerable distances. There were neighbours, Quakers, aviation and art people and some old friends from Ballymoney.

We followed the plain white cardboard coffin into the chapel. (Wilma was keen on the Testimony to Simplicity and had led a Meeting for Learning on the topic in November, so we felt this would have been her own choice.) The Meeting for Worship opened with a brief introduction for those unfamiliar with Quaker worship, then into silence. “Face to Face That I Shall Meet Him” (from Ry Cooder's album Jazz, track 2) was played. After another silence I read the following written by Wilma at the age of 22:

Out of the body goes the mind
Under the cavern and over the line
Round the universe three thousand times.

Floating above the unsightly plains
Swirling over the seas again
Drifting into a land of bliss
A land of thoughtful nothingness.

A state of the dead
Both body and mind
And yet a new life in the search of peace
Floating away where time has ceased.

There was a further silence before “Happy Meeting in Glory” (from Ry Cooder's album Jazz, track 5) was played. A further short silence was followed by the Iona prayer,

“Into the freedom of wind and sunshine we let you go,
Into the dance of the stars and the planets we let you go.
Into the wind’s breath and the hands of the starmaker we let you go.
We love you, we miss you, we want you to be happy: go safely, go dancing,
go running home.”

The Meeting closed shortly after. Because we were now running late, and as we had spoken to almost everyone beforehand, we did not stop outside the crematorium to talk, but went straight on to Cheltenham Meeting House. There, more friends arrived and there was much interesting talk over the food.

The memorial Meeting for Worship to celebrate Wilma's life was opened again with a brief introduction and then went into a powerful silence for a few minutes. (*This was followed by a moving testimony from Rowland – see below.*) About 8 or 10 other people offered spoken ministry during the hour, mentioning the warmth, friendship, spiritual communion, empathy and love they had received from Wilma. Her sister Margaret’s ministry reminded us that we should treat the occasion not as a funeral but as a wedding since it represented a marriage of Wilma's soul with the divine. Often at memorial Meetings for Worship there is not as much silence as in a normal MfW, but in this Meeting the silence was measured and deep.

Margaret and I were supported by many people including those who were not physically present. Thanks to everyone.

The cash collection at the Meeting House for Womankind Worldwide amounted to £152.50. I have not yet heard from the undertakers what was collected at the Crematorium, and there may have been other gifts made direct to WW.

Rowland Carson

Rowland Carson's Testimony to Wilma

Although it is not usual to prepare ministry in advance of a Quaker Meeting, I had written what I wanted to say — not because I doubted that inspiration would come, but because I was unsure if I would be able at such an emotional time to respond adequately to spiritual promptings. I read this:

Wilma Ivy McWatters was born in 1941 and brought up in Belfast.

From an early age, her mother encouraged her to play the violin and she became leader of the City of Belfast Youth Orchestra; among her contemporaries there was James Galway. That was fun, but she really preferred the intimacy of a string quartet, where the relationships between the players are vital to success. Her musical tastes were wide, ranging from Kathryn Tickell to Status Quo — and at the Crematorium you heard that, like me, she was a Ry Cooder fan.

Despite parental prodding towards music her real love was always art and at college she trained as a sculptor. For a time she taught art as head of a school department, but felt she was not a natural teacher and began to look elsewhere for fulfillment.

She moved to London in the 1960s and while working there met me at the Methodist Youth Club in *Private Eye's* favourite suburb of Neasden. We had both been Presbyterians of different sorts in Northern Ireland but had found that Presbyterian churches were thin on the ground in England.

Wilma began to produce a series of abstract paintings which appeared in her mind's eye fully-formed, ready to set down. It was only somewhat later that she discovered their symbolic meanings such as the Tree of Life and the Mandala, and realised that they formed a journal of her own spiritual development. She joined the newly-formed Arts Centre Group which supports Christians working in all branches of the arts.

In the 1970s my job moved to Suffolk, which Wilma felt was something of a cultural desert compared to London. She would take day trips to the capital and refresh her creative juices at exhibitions and galleries such as the ICA.

She never tired of questioning the direction she was taking and was always wondering if she was doing the thing that was right for her. In trying to find the best medium of expression she explored both on her own and through training courses jewellery, tapestry weaving, screen printing, calligraphy, woodblock printing and engraving. She used different types of paint on canvas, paper and most recently, on silk. Her influences included Meinrad Craighead, Agnes Martin, Elizabeth Blackadder, Patrick Heron, the Book of Kells, the Lindisfarne Gospels, and Islamic calligraphy, carpets and tessellation.

She was sensitive to her surroundings; she loved light and colour and was considering working with coloured glass. She wanted her art to reflect what she was — female, Ulster-Scots, Quaker.

She came to understand that her paintings were chiefly for herself, rather than something to be sold as a decoration for someone's wall. Art was simply one of the tools she was using for spiritual growth, and it provided waymarks on her journey.

In the early 1980s, thanks to her sister Margaret, she and I found Quakers. Wilma became a member before long and was already serving as an Elder in Suffolk when I applied for membership. At the time of her death she was again an Elder here in Gloucestershire.

She took her spiritual life seriously and tried to have an hour's quiet time every day. She read widely, especially on spiritual topics, and accumulated a thick file labelled "spiritual notes". She would devour anything written by Karen Armstrong; other favourite authors were Thomas Kelly, Thomas Merton, Evelyn Underhill, Joseph Campbell, Lorna Marsden and Hugh McGregor Ross. She even found time for Terry Pratchett.

She read of the Dark Night of the Soul and the Dark Night Journey realising they described her own experience. She found that Jungian psychology, shamans, psychosynthesis, Zen, Sufis, Quakers and many other disciplines used different language to describe, and different tools to approach, the same fundamental experiences as the Catholic mystics such as St Teresa of Avila.

Wilma felt privileged that she did not have to join an enclosed order but could undertake her pilgrimage through the depths and to the heights of spiritual experience in the communion of Quaker worship. She wanted everyone to know that Meeting for Worship is not just people sitting quietly for an hour — that time of silence is hard, concentrated work, and can only fully achieve its transforming purpose when all those present are working together.

All of us have different gifts and talents. Our backgrounds had many things in common, but as a couple, we seemed to have abilities and personalities that complemented each other. I am very sad to have lost the physical nearness of such a good friend but am comforted by the memory of all the happiness we enjoyed.

While Wilma often felt her physical health and strength was lacking, her intellectual ability was high. But she set her intellect aside when allowing her intuition to lead her artistic and spiritual development. She often spoke of one or other of the great mystics as a “spiritual genius”. It would be presumptuous to apply that description to her, but if there was such a thing as a spiritual MENSA, I'm sure she would have qualified for membership.

She believed passionately that our chief purpose is to become one with God. That experience is variously described as becoming whole, enlightenment, achieving spiritual union, reaching the centre, contemplative prayer, paradise, or transcendence. All the rest of life should flow from experiencing that state, or from the striving towards it. A couple of days before her death she told me that, should she not survive the cancers that had been indicated, she was content with her life and with what she had achieved. That was not accumulation of much possessions nor building of a great reputation but spiritual fulfilment through the exercise of her spiritual gifts.

Notes from Local Meeting

Wilma Carson and Peter Hazell: It is with great sorrow that we recorded the death of Wilma Carson on 13th January. We extend our loving sympathy to her husband Rowland and her sister Margaret.

We also recorded the death of Peter Hazell on 28th January. Peter was a longstanding member of this Meeting, and there will be a Meeting to celebrate his life on Sunday, 29th March.

Nominations Committee: Nominations Committee has prepared a draft list of office holders current at the commencement of the January 2009 Triennium. This finalized list will be printed in the Cheltenham Quaker. Additional Elders, Overseers, members of Premises and Nominations Committee are sought, as well as the appointment of the Lettings Officer. Ian Brighton has kindly produced a job description of the office of Letting Officer, which will be posted on the Meeting notice board. Whilst this is an important appointment, Ian says that it is not as onerous as might be anticipated, and Nominations Committee would welcome the opportunity of discussing the appointment with anybody who felt they might be able to serve the Meeting in this way. We agreed to send forward to Area Meeting the nomination of Ruth Baker as a Friend responsible for funerals, and we are seeking a further nomination for this office.

Strengthen Peace in the UK: Supporting the QPSW Initiative: On behalf of the Peace Group Cynthia Baron outlined why they had chosen to support the four peace workers involved in the United Kingdom. Further details will be available when we have signaled our intentions to QPSW. We support our Peace Group in their pursuit of this initiative, and we shall review the situation at the next Local Meeting.

Outreach: Making use of the Gloucestershire Echo regularly to publicise Cheltenham Quakers:
Report: A mechanism is now in place to publicise our Meeting in the Gloucestershire Echo, and three submissions have been offered, with two appearing in print. Items of interest (e.g. Peace Group, Meetings for Learning etc.) could be included, and copy needs to be given to Christine O'Neill on Sunday. In this regard a contact person from Cheltenham Quakers, who is willing to allow his/her telephone number to be published in the Echo, is being sought.

John Cross

A Personal Message from Rowland

Thanks to all those who have offered sympathy and support after Wilma's death, through phone calls, cards, letters and personal visits. With no children of our own and both our parents dead some time ago, we have regarded the Meeting as our family, and your reactions to Wilma's death have reinforced that feeling. I do not subscribe to the stiff upper-lip “let them grieve in private” approach and welcome human contact. If you're in the area, please drop in for a cup of tea and a chat. This invitation is of permanent standing, not just limited to the present period of grieving. If no answer to the front doorbell, try knocking on the garage door.

Rowland Carson