

## **Report from the Safe Quaker Community Committee (SQCC), 24 August 2021 WORKSHOP ON THE ROLE OF CONTACT FRIENDS IN THE AUSTRALIAN QUAKER COMMUNITY**

On Saturdays 7<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> August 2021, the AYM Safe Quaker Community Committee presented a workshop of two 90-minute sessions by Zoom, to prepare those appointed as Safe Quaker Contact Friends by Regional Meetings. The Committee was aware of the usefulness of a previous workshop for Contact Friends held in Brisbane in 2019. For some months during 2020-21 the Committee and Contact Friends collected appropriate resources, drew on the earlier work of Safe Quaker Community Conveners on safe Quaker practice, and discussed possible dates for the workshop, choosing to meet by Zoom because of the interruptions caused by Covid-19.

This is a Report of these sessions.

### **Session 1, 7 August 2021**

The Session began with silence, acknowledgement of custodians of the land, and welcome by Convener, of the SQCC, to the ten Contact Friends from six of the seven Regional Meetings.

**The focus of this first session of the workshop was a discussion of the emerging Safe Quaker Community Policy**, which defined the responsibilities of AYM and the Regional Meetings to:

- provide 'a safe environment for all',
- promote 'caring and respectful relationships between people',
- provide 'appropriate support and assistance',
- 'create an environment which does not tolerate violence, discrimination and abuse', and which adheres to 'relevant Federal and State/Territory legislation'.

Insurance requirements must be met.

Important, too, is the annual review of the implementation of the Safe Quaker Community Policy each Regional Meeting is required to conduct.

### **Within that environment:**

- **the Safe Quaker Contact Friend's main role is to listen to and support persons making complaints, exploring appropriate options with them, to heal a relationship and restore respect.**
- More widely, the Contact Friend needs to promote the Safe Quaker Community Policy and its implementation in the Regional Meeting, educating Friends, perhaps in workshops using role plays, and maintaining relevant resources for Friends' use.
- Contact Friends need to conduct 'annual awareness sessions' in local and recognised meetings, and to be well informed about 'appropriate Quaker conflict resolution processes'.
- Nurturing close relationships with members of the Oversight and Pastoral Care Committees and with Contact Friends in other parts of the country is helpful for the Contact Friends' continuing education in the role.

**In recent months, the Safe Quaker Community Committee became aware of the need to define more clearly the relationship between Regional Meetings and the Contact Friends.** Especially important was to understand that the role of the Contact Friend is to:

- listen to, and support a person with a complaint about disrespectful behaviour by others,
- acknowledge their distress and courage in making a complaint,
- and reassure them that there are options which can provide redress and healing.

In discussing these options, the person with the complaint chooses an appropriate one, reassured that the Contact Friend will continue to give support. **The Contact Friend does not solve the problem for others, but rather advises, enables and supports them in the choice they make.**

The Meeting closed in silence.

### **Session 2, 14 August 2021**

The meeting began with silence, acknowledgement of custodians of the land.

**In the above policy context discussed in Session 1, Session 2 of the workshop provided an opportunity for Contact Friends in role plays, to act out relationships with persons making complaints.** Several scenarios were contributed for the purpose (see p. 4).

- The Contact Friend was to listen deeply to the person, acknowledging the distress, reflecting back the feelings involved, and encouraging a discussion about possible options for redress and healing, and offering support in the option chosen.
- An observer was to assess the process involved, noting the essential steps taken.
- There were three groups of three Friends participating, using two or more scenarios in their practice.
- One group chose to role play using four scenarios, each about 15 minutes, allowing all to have a chance to play each role; another group chose two scenarios, to spend more time stating the nature of the discrimination, acknowledging the impact it caused, mentioning the many different options which could be used in response, inviting the person to make an appropriate choice, and continuing to offer support.
- Again, the observer commented on the process and gave feedback to the players.

**The focus on role play was essential in clarifying the role of Contact Friends, and in experiencing what that role feels like in relating to persons with complaints.** Friends were aware of other aspects of their role:

- familiarising themselves with the detail of the range of options and the different personnel and organisations which may be consulted;
- the importance of confidentiality;
- the use of reports and the secure keeping of confidential files;
- and the nature of follow up after the issue has been formally dealt with.

In this regard, especially useful in defining the roles of Regional Meetings and Contact Friends is *A Resource Manual and Guide f-or Safe Quaker Community Contact Friends (SQC CFs) and Other Interested Australian Quakers* of September 2019.

Friends, who at the beginning of Session 1 reported feeling ‘appreciative and grateful for this opportunity, hopeful for clarification, somewhat anxious, unsure, even overwhelmed and stressed’, at its end reported being ‘really grateful to the Convener and the Committee for finding a wealth of information in the documents shared; and the Contact Friends need to continue to build on that good foundation. Opportunities could offer practising aspects of the Contact Friends’ role, more regular check-ins/practices as an option.

There was acknowledgement of the previous SQC Committee Conveners, pioneers of the AYM concern on Safe Quaker Practices, who were the core SQCCF committee members for many years until 2019.

**Participants at the end of Session 1 spoke of**

- being 'encouraged that Contact Friends were here for each other';
- feeling 'more comfortable in understanding processes, the amazing resources showing the potential for good contributions'; 'more reassured and supported'.
- thinking that 'The whole process of sharing dilemmas was useful and very valuable in leading into session 2'.
- thinking that 'it is important for Quakers to be talking to each other about whether they also experienced bullying from perpetrators', 'to be aware of patterns of behaviour in a Meeting';
- thinking that the 'really helpful' session will mean Contact Friends will be 'busy giving training' in Regional Meetings;
- concluding that it was good to have a range of Contact Friends and Regional Meetings and that we can consider how to involve Australian Quakers in a positive way.

**These feelings and thoughts developed more strongly in Session 2** giving Friends greater knowledge, a stronger sense of confidence, and a great appreciation of finding such joy in working with people in a loving environment, reinforcing the community of Contact Friends. There was a strong sense that for 'persons coming to Contact Friends, we have something to offer'. Many welcomed the idea of continuing these practice opportunities once or twice a year. Friends from TRM reported news of a coming information SQC session on Zoom organised by TRM. The following Sunday the TRM's Meeting for Worship for Business is considering which committee is to be responsible for, and to work with Contact Friends. CRM Contact Friends are meeting the Pastoral and Oversight Committees and may use the scenarios to help the committees appreciate the role of Contact Friends and the importance of the Regional Meeting supporting and working with them.

**Returning to the Safe Quaker Policy, the Convenor noted that the Committee is taking up issues regarding its implementation.**

A CRM Friend mentioned that he and a TRM Friend are working to make it easier to apply the Safe Quaker Policy so that the Contact Friend is more easily identified as the first point of contact. The CRM Friend was also concerned that at the national level, 'AYM has no council of elders, no deeper level of eldership responsible for holding this spiritual underpinning'.

Regional Meetings and Yearly Meeting are yet to finalise the Safe Quaker Community Policy and the Code of Practice.

The meeting closed with silence.

**UPDATED LIST OF SCENARIOS ON 14 AUG. 2021  
PRACTISING COMPASSIONATE LISTENING SKILLS**

Please find below the scenarios you (RM Safe Quaker Community Contact Friends) may wish to use in practising your compassionate listening skills:

1. Friend A, feeling hurt and upset, complains to you about Friend B, who, strident in beliefs, has a dominating personality, and continually speaks over Friend A and others in committee meetings, and does the same thing during Quaker social gatherings. Other Friends seem to tolerate this behaviour to keep the peace, as, when some have raised the issue, Friend B has become defensive and accused Friend A of being too sensitive.
2. A Friend approaches you with the following issue. A Friend in their worshipping group continues to approach others with offers to explore a relationship with them. They have politely said thank you for the offer but they are not interested. The response deterred the Friend, but only for a few months. This behaviour has left Friends feeling anxious and reluctant to attend Meeting for Worship and other Quaker events. When raised with other Friends in the worshipping group, they were told, 'Don't worry about that Friend, the approaches are harmless'.
3. A scenario of a Friend in a small worshipping group raising the need for the group to consider contributing financially to the regional meeting's annual quota. Others, led by a dominating friend, refused to call a Meeting for Worship for Business to discuss the issue. The Friend, feeling isolated and shunned, approaches you for some advice on how to deal with this situation.
4. A friend, who identifies as transsexual and queer, approaches you in relation to feeling uncomfortable and unsafe when Friends don't use their preferred pronoun 'they' when addressing them. They are concerned some Friends deliberately don't use it, but are unsure. They would also like to raise the issue of designating toilets as unisex, rather than male and female, at Quaker events. However, they feel uncomfortable raising this issue, given the current situation around Friends' inability to use the preferred pronoun when talking to or about transsexual and queer friends. They approach you for some advice on how to deal with this situation.
5. A scenario provided by a Contact Friend in your practice group.