

A Brief History of Peacemakers

Start

Sidney White, whom Friends remember as the prime mover and inspirer of the West Midlands Quaker Peace Education Project's (WMQPEP) work, had a basic premise that since time immemorial we had taught war, now was the time to teach peace, to adults, to children, to ourselves. Sidney believed in looking to the future; for years he campaigned with the assiduity of John Woolman to persuade Friends individually and collectively that the time was ripe to set up an organisation, which could actually deliver education for peace within the school curriculum.

The WMQPEP eventually began, in rooms made available by Woodbrooke College, in 1987. It was established as a joint project of Warwickshire and Staffordshire Monthly Meetings, to each of whom it would report annually.

Andrew Chandler was appointed as project organiser, part time from May and full time from September. Jan Davis joined as part time assistant in September. A Steering Group of members of Warwickshire and Staffordshire Monthly Meetings was set up,

A leaflet was produced, which described the purpose of the Project as follows:

The Project aims to encourage:-

- An awareness, in school pupils and students, of conflict between individuals, groups and nations;
- The involvement of pupils and students in seeking positive and non-violent means of resolving such conflicts;
- The development within the entire school curriculum and the "hidden curriculum" of skills in solving inter-personal conflict;
- The exploration of peace, justice, disarmament, ecology, world development and human rights issues as part of the process of helping pupils and students to acquire skills of enquiry and critical assessment;
- The nurture in our children and young people of the values and attitudes of self-respect, creative goodwill – in Quaker terms this is expressed as "answering that of God in everyone" – and cooperation.

Development

In 1990 the project appointed Hilary Stacey as co-ordinator, initially for two, later three days a week. During the next three years considerable growth took place. The project worked in a number of schools in the area and the region. Hilary visited Dresden to explore links with Coventry on the development of an A level German pack. School based work of a more sustained nature was developed, including, increasingly, mediation training and other education for peace as well as education about peace.

The peer mediation work now so central to the Project began at this time. In 1990 only Kingston Friends Workshop Group (KFWG) was doing this type of work in the UK, based on ideas brought back from Quaker projects in the USA. Hilary visited KFWG, was fired up by what she saw, and brought it back to Dudley. By January – March 1994 work at Jessons Primary School had developed into a peer mediation scheme involving the training of children in three classes of 8-9 year olds in peace-making and mediation. This had been some time in the planning and fund-raising, and at the end it was possible to pass remaining monies over to the school to continue the

work. The school won an award from the Times Educational Supplement for curriculum innovation and democratic participation.

The work in nearby Leasowes Primary School was on conflict resolution. This focussed on the Deputy Head's year 6 class of 35 pupils. The 8 – 10 year olds were very responsive, and one occasion a group was taken to Woodbrooke to work in role-play situations alongside adults on a weekend course on conflict resolution. The children were, in the words of one of the workers, "firm, clear and pleasant" and in no way intimidated by the new surroundings, or the task of instructing adults in role-play. Hilary wrote of this work: "the skills that I was teaching – effective resolution of conflict, affirmation, communication and co-operation – were the same for both adults and children." The 'twenty-hour pack' (this being the total time spread over ten weeks that was devoted to the work with the children) was written up and used as a basis for replicating the programme elsewhere. This formed the basis of the Peacemaker course still run in schools.

Hilary, like Andrew before her, had had to balance the demands of the office with the need to be out in schools, meetings and elsewhere, and this grew increasingly difficult. It was her success in "growing" the project that led to the next major review by Warwickshire and Staffordshire Monthly Meetings in 1993, as a result of which the present structure was created, converting the project into one which, although more narrowly focussed, had greater scope for expansion.

Linda Pegler succeeded Hilary as project manager on the first of January 1994, having previously served on the Steering Group. The growing demands of administering the Project meant that she became, inevitably, a mainly office-based manager.

It is interesting to read, almost twenty years on, that in 1993 the project concentrated on its basic 'Peacemaker' and peer mediation training workshops in schools – and also to note that, of the many such projects undertaken over the years, most continued, firmly established, after WMQPEP had left.

Linda Pegler commented on one side effect of the Jessons work

"Levels of dispute within the school have dropped dramatically, leaving some frustrated 9 year old mediators with not a lot to mediate."

In 1995 a new statement of the aims of the project – a little more succinct than that in the 1987 leaflet – was written. Aims of the Project

As Quakers we believe that it is both possible and vitally important for the future that peaceful relationships should be achieved in all areas of life, for example:

Family, school, workplace, community and international relations.

Conflict is part of everyday life so it is vitally important that children should understand its causes, both in social conditions and in personal relationships. We all need to learn ways of creatively resolving conflict without resorting to aggression.

Our aims:

1. To promote peaceful relationships as realistic and attainable, among individuals and communities in the West Midlands.
2. To train people in peace making skills.

3. To foster conflict resolution and mediation projects in schools.

4. To provide resources and learning materials relating to peace issues, mediation and conflict resolution.

One of the problems was funding. The funding provided by Friends and Trusts only covered the core costs of providing an office base and administering the project. Schools therefore needed to be charged for the courses provided in order to pay the workers. It was felt that, in any case, this was right in principle; the project needed to position itself as a high quality and fully professional provider, rather than a charity willing to do something for nothing in order to get a foot in the door. The trouble was that schools had heavily competing demands on their budgets as well as their time, and the system was developed, and remains, whereby the project developed its own bursary fund, in effect charging schools for the work but also helping them find these costs.

The work of the project increasingly tended to fall into one of two categories - ten-week (sometimes shorter) courses in individual schools on co-operative skills or mediation, and one off events such as workshops in colleges, meeting houses, etc. and participation in special events organised by schools.

As well as direct work with young people, a considerable contribution has been made over the years to the training of teachers and other adults. There were, of course, regular training events for teachers at schools at which programmes were planned to introduce mediation skills to the pupils, but there were also several events specifically for adults. These included inputs into training workshops for BA Humanities students, Secondary Heads and Educational Welfare Officers. Day workshops were run in several Meeting Houses.

In 1995, for example, the annual report lists such events as covering peace activities for primary school children, peer mediation schemes in primary schools, anti-bullying strategies, anger management and negotiation skills and how to organise a teacher training day.

An independent review of the project by Warwickshire Monthly Meeting was set up in 1998, and reported to Monthly Meeting in March 2000. As always, Monthly Meeting expressed its support for the project.

[Linda's successor] Alice Meager remarked that she had been "surprised by the far-reaching effects of a small project" in 2002.

Work in these years continued to concentrate on 10 week courses in a variety of schools - some with a long standing relationship to the project, some new – together with some one-off events. In 2004, for example, the Project worked in nine schools where it had worked previously and four new; in 2005 work was done in 16 schools

"QPEP has enormous potential which it has been slow to realise, but if one child in one classroom is able to use his skills in a difficult conflict situation with success, at any time in his life, the Project will be a huge success. Those of us who have been involved, in whatever capacity, do not need to know about individual successes of this kind. We already know the skills are there in the experience of the large numbers of young people and professionals with whom we have worked." Alice Meager, Project Director from 2001 – 2009.

The years since 2000 have seen many new workers join the project, as well as changes in office staff, but many Friends and others have continued a very long standing commitment to the Project, including Win Sutton as Librarian and Carol Marsh as Secretary/Administrator. When Carol finally left the Project in 2006, after 16 years' service, a link with the early days was lost.

Another major turning point followed only two years later, when Alice Meager retired, and the Project moved to Edgbaston with its new Project Manager, Sara Hagel.

It was around this time that it was decided to apply to JRCT for funding for a two year Research and Development Worker. JRCT only gave QPEP part of what was asked for. They felt the Research stage should be tackled first, with matching funding from Area Meeting and themselves, leaving the development till later. [Sybil Ruth was Steering Group Convenor] Sybil wrote,

“It was challenging to combine our idealism and individuality with making ‘business-like’ choices about which options – out of the many open to us - we wanted to go pursue.

As a Steering Group, I felt we were very blessed. We’ve had the support of Area Meeting, the guidance of John Gray our consultant, the hard work of Sara Hagel, and our own high level of commitment.

I am delighted that JRCT have chosen to fund the next ‘Peacemaker’ phase of our Project’s work. There are more challenges ahead. But I feel the Project’s work in schools is more important than ever.”

A new Strategic Plan

After much prayerful seeking, a strategic plan for 2011 – 2014 was drafted, expressing the vision and aims of the project as follows:

WMQPEP exists to help create a more peaceful world, with more caring and resilient communities. We want a world where people are equipped to deal non-violently and creatively with the inevitable conflicts that arise. Our contribution to promoting a more harmonious society in the West Midlands is the development of peace-making behaviour of children and adults in schools.

We want to help ensure that:

- More primary schools in the West Midlands implement peaceful, inclusive and restorative approaches to conflict resolution at different levels throughout their schools
- More children will be equipped with the skills to manage conflict at different levels
- More adults in schools know about and use inclusive and restorative approaches to conflict resolution and have peacemaker skills
- There is increased awareness of the benefits of restorative approaches to conflict resolution in schools in the West Midlands (within schools themselves, local authorities and other relevant organisations).

Ellis Brooks was appointed in April 2010 as the project’s first permanently employed Peace Education Trainer. Part-time freelance trainers continued to work for the project, and the total number of schools in which the project worked continued to grow. A second permanent worker, Anna Gregory, was appointed in 2011.

One of the very clear leadings, implicit in the aims quoted above, was the development of a Whole School Approach programme. This represented a major new development for the project, initially piloted in three Birmingham schools over a two- year period, with funding from the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust. Anna Gregory joined the project particularly to develop this work. Following the unrest in Birmingham and other UK cities in the summer of 2011, there was growing awareness of the need for a truly person-centred approach, which would encompass the whole of the school community and beyond. These pilots sought to involve all members of the school community and include events for parents, training for staff on conflict resolution, circle time and

restorative practices, training for lunch time supervisors and time for children and staff to explore together the way they cooperate, as well as classroom-based activities.

In 2013, Jackie Zammit joins the team of core staff and brought with her expertise in Global Learning and curriculum development.

In 2015 the project moves from the Edgbaston Meeting House to join a new Quaker initiative 'The Peace Hub' on Bull Street, central Birmingham.

In 2016 the resource 'Learning for Peace' was developed which saw core activities and pedagogy combined in to a book and an online resource.

In 2017, the project celebrated its 30th year with a Children's Peace Summit to which 80 children from across Birmingham came together to take part in workshops exploring inner peace, peace in school, peace on the streets and peace in the world.

The summit was held on International Peace Day and to make the most of the day, a birthday party was thrown to celebrate 30 years of peacemaking in schools in the West Midlands. Friends, project workers, trainers and school colleagues old and new to the project attended.

Many thanks to John Cockroft who documented the history of WMQPEP in 2013 which has informed so much of the information above.