

## The Empty Chair

Recently the decision of some member churches of Churches Together England (CTE) to not accept Quaker, Hannah Brock Womack as one of the six Presidents has caused great sadness and pain for Quakers. The non-acceptance of Hannah as one of the 6 Presidents will result in an empty chair which has and will symbolise a dis-unity amongst member churches on the issue of same-sex marriage and human sexuality.

Recording Clerk for Quakers in Britain, Paul Parker has said *“This is a deeply sad decision. Quakers in Britain value the fact that CTE seeks to encompass the wide diversity among Christians in England. It is important to us that the Quaker voice is heard in discussions between Churches.”*

Whilst acknowledging the pain and discomfort this has caused within CTE we, as Quakers are called to answer that of God in everyone. Paul Parker added *“We recognise the inherent worth of each person. That leads us to welcome all committed same-sex relationships as equally as committed opposite sex relationships. We value equally all people, regardless of sexuality or other defining characteristics. These characteristics are not the right way to decide if someone is to serve as our CTE President.”*

It has been a long and difficult journey for Quakers to reach the present decision on same-sex marriage. In 1963, the booklet ‘Towards a Quaker View of Sex’ stated, *“It is the nature and quality of a relationship that matters... the same criteria seem to us to apply whether a relationship is heterosexual or homosexual.”* We believe that two hundred years from now, those who follow us will be equally astounded to discover that in the twenty-first century we had still to realise the full equality of lesbian and gay people.

In the Quaker book of Christian Discipline (Quaker Faith & Practice 27.12) we can all appreciate the words of Thomas Story who wrote this in 1737: *“The unity of Christians never did nor ever will or can stand in uniformity of thought and opinion, but in Christian love only.”* We are committed to supporting diversity work among churches and faiths so that ecumenical bodies reflect the real diversity in Churches in England. We will continue to work with love alongside the delicate differences of Christian expression as witnessed here in Churches Together in Cornwall.

*Lesley Chandler*

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The Religious Society of Friends, known informally as Quakers is a member of three national bodies, namely ACTS: Action of Churches Together in Scotland, CTE: Churches Together in England and Cytûn: Eglywsi ynghyd yng Nghymru, Churches Together in Wales and of Churches Together in Britain & Ireland (CTBI).