



# Art as ministry

*Elinor Smallman  
reflects on a Quaker  
Arts Network event*



The finished mandala. Photo: Elinor Smallman

Complete silence. A gathered Meeting. Rich, unspoken, ministry; expressed through pencil, charcoal and ink.

Such was the experience of Friends who gathered for an art-based Meeting for Worship, led by Judith Bromley Nicholls and Linda Murgatroyd, at the close of a recent Quaker Arts Network (QAN) event. Each was given a blank segment of a mandala and a selection of black and white materials. Each segment became the canvas upon which Friends could express the connection between their inward and outward selves, and of joining with others in Quaker Meeting. Coming together in a spirit of worship, the mandala blossomed as each segment joined the others... with visual ministry spilling onto the page as those present felt moved.

The resulting artwork marked the first all-day event held by QAN; a day described as 'deeply worshipful' and that many participants said felt like 'coming home'.

Seventeen Friends – including professional artists, passionate amateurs, counsellors and teachers – met for a day of threshing, discussion and sharing last November at Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre.

Their minute begins: 'We have come together as a Quaker group and have shared our individual experience of creative activity being a way of connecting to a greater energy, coming both from outside ourselves and also from a deep place within. We experience our art work as a way of exploring and communicating the mystery of the divine, often using a language beyond words. We feel led to form a community which will help us to uphold and support one another, enabling us to benefit from the strength and energy a Quaker group can create. We would like artists and the arts to become more accepted, visible and recognised in the Quaker context in order to be of use to the wider Quaker community, including both

outreach and inreach.'

QAN first met in January 2011 (see 'Art in the Society', 8 July 2011) and has since grown to include 104 Friends across Britain and beyond. Much of the event in November was spent discerning the future of the Network and exploring the role it could play. For example, what is meant by 'Arts'? Is it limited to painting and drawing? No. The overwhelming sense was of the importance of creative acts, no matter what the medium: poetry, stained glass, sculpture, theatre, film, music, photography, painting and more.

What makes an artist, whether professional or amateur, or a piece of art 'Quaker'? Is art important to Quakers? Discussions showed that the meaning of art to an individual Friend can vary as much as taste and specialism; for some it is a therapeutic tool, a way of externalising the internal, for others it is a spiritual practice, a way of offering a different kind of ministry and communicating 'wisdom and experience that are almost beyond writing'. Art is seen as a way of breaking down barriers, particularly those of language.

The urge to reach out, both to others in the Religious Society of Friends and to non-Quakers, was palpable and the event was instrumental in discerning a number of future activities, including establishing a website to act as a hub for information about events and artists. One aim has already come to fruition, the Quaker Arts Network is now a Listed Informal Group within Britain Yearly Meeting. Plans are already underway for a presence at Yearly Meeting in May and another Woodbrooke event next October. An exciting time ahead for the burgeoning community!

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*To join the Quaker Arts Network mailing list please contact [quakerartsuk@gmail.com](mailto:quakerartsuk@gmail.com).*