Transcript of a talk given by Jennifer Kavanagh on the theme ‘Pathways to Peace’, at the Quaker Voluntary Action (QVA) AGM held on 12 September 2026, via Zoom

Introduction to the transcript

This is a ‘semi-verbatim’ transcript that omits repetitions, false starts, technical queries etc. We have added headings to help you navigate this document. They are accompanied by timestamps in case you would like to use the transcript alongside the video recording, available here.

Jennifer Kavanagh: a personal reflection on Pathways to Peace

JENNIFER KAVANAGH: Everything we do needs to be grounded in our faith. QVA is not just an activist organisation. As we'll see, we're guided in what we do, and supported as we do it.

I like to think of Meeting for Worship as a triangle. The self, the divine, and the others in the room, and we take that triangle out into the world. So much of what we do is led by other people. Interestingly, there was ministry at Westminster Meeting last Sunday about how to be patterns, how to be examples, as George Fox said.

What can each of us do about the global issues of today? In a sense, that is what we'll be talking about today. I've been asked to talk on the theme of Pathways to Peace from the perspective of my own life, so this is a personal talk. All our pathways are different. And they'll be different at different times of life, depending on what responsibilities we have, and the need to earn a living. But it's possible that something I say will spark something in you - we never know. Hope so.

Faith, community and making a difference.

Timestamp: 1:42

After an Anglican upbringing, I lost my faith, or it went underground, until about midlife when, after a traumatic time, faith came to me. I don't say I found faith, because it very much found me. And after searching around a while, I found Quakers. And I couldn't believe what I'd found; I didn't know religion could be like this. And so, as I said, I came late, and I jumped in with both feet. It was as if the Spirit was kicking me up the backside and saying, ‘come on, you've taken long enough, get on with it.’ I came to Quakers as a spiritual quest. I was not looking for community, but I found one. A nurturing community, but also an enabling one.

I'd been a very idealistic child. I remember hearing about starvation in parts of Africa and saying to my parents, ‘if people are starving, why can't we put tins of food on ships and send them over?’ And there was a sort of, ‘there, there, dear’ kind of response. There was a feeling that poverty and injustice were just too great for us to make a difference. And I think that's still generally the case, that there are so many people in the world who would like to make a difference, and have no idea how they might do it. They just feel everything is too big for them to make a difference.

But when I came to Quakers I discovered people who were making a difference, in small local ways maybe, but it gave me permission to think that maybe there was something that I could do.

Quaker volunteering in London

Timestamp: 3:50

As you know, when you come to a Quaker meeting you get asked to do things. And the first thing that I was asked to do was to coordinate the tea runs for homeless people that various London meetings were running.

I worked in publishing. I had never volunteered in my life. I had no idea about tea runs or the homelessness in London, but I thought I'd better go on a tea run and see what it was like. I had all sorts of preconceptions. I thought I might be sneered at as a middle-class do-gooder (which probably wasn't far from the truth!). Or banged over the head by a druggie with a bottle. But of course, neither of those things happened.

The moment I approached someone and asked if they would like a cup of tea, and did they take sugar, it was the beginning of a human relationship. And I realised that the person in the doorway could be me, and that there is no such thing as ‘the other’. It was an epiphany. And I learned that so far from do-goodery, this kind of volunteering is about being alongside. It's a mutual thing.

Well, I became clerk of Quaker Homeless Action. And I had the idea of a mobile library for homeless people. And when I took it to the other Trustees, I expected there to be a bit of amusement, ‘oh, yes, yes, because you work in publishing.’ But actually, they were all for it. We started it in 1999 and it's still going. It's now called Turn a Corner, and is run by Quaker Social Action, which took over Quaker Homeless Action some time ago. It's very much about equality. Lending books to people in the same way as they would borrow books in any other

circumstance. Trusting them to bring them back. Having a conversation about books on an equal basis.

Faith and being shown the way forward

Timestamp: 6:20

So, as I said, I was working in publishing. I was a literary agent and I had long wanted to let go of it, because I was fed up with celebrity culture, the bottom line mentality. But because I didn't know what I would do, I stayed with it. Until faith came upon me. And then I realised I didn't need to know what I was going to do, I would be shown. And I thought, how has it taken me so long in my life to understand this is the way to live? So, with ways to look after my authors in place, I sold my agency.

And sure enough, what I was to do was shown by a phone call from Quaker Social Action, an independent charity, as you know. And they said, 'we've been asked to start a community centre in the east end of London, one of the poorest wards in the country. Would you like to do it?'

Well, again, I had no idea what a community centre was, or anything about the East End. But I said yes. And I turned up at this enormous church, I had a little room at the top of it with a little electric fire. Very fortunately, another charity was doing a needs analysis in the area, and one of the needs that came up was something for mothers and toddlers. So I thought, okay, I'll start a mothers and toddlers group. And I got a big box of toys from a toy library and I made some posters, some leaflets, and I handed them out to people at school gates at the end of the day.

And then on the first day, I sat in this enormous hall, alone with this box, and waited. And finally, somebody came in, and they were rather surprised to find that there was nobody else there! But anyway, it grew. And we had a women's group of various ethnicities and ages, [it was] very much a Bangladeshi area. And we started meals for isolated people; the people who came to it were recommended by district nurses and so on. And we had a couple of cooks of different nationalities, and we got them to do health and safety certificates, so they were trained up, and they produced meals and also recipes so that people could take those away. And it all went very well.

Microcredit, travel and a Churchill Fellowship

Timestamp: 9:20

And then I realised that some kind of financial intervention was going to be necessary if some of these women - who were very poor - if their lives were going to be changed. I had no idea there

was such poverty in London. I mean, it sounds terribly naive now. But I simply didn't know about it. Anyway, there I was, and there they were.

I started to do some research, and I read about microcredit, which is lending small amounts of money to women in poverty to start businesses. It started in Bangladesh with the Grameen Bank. Muhammad Yunus, who's now running the country, started it. And Mike Jenn, who [was] the head of QSA [Quaker Social Action], said, 'why don't you apply for a Churchill Fellowship?'

I did, I got one, and I went to Bangladesh, Poland, and France to study microcredit and how it was working in various countries. It is a wonderful process. It's very much community based. Everyone has to be in a group of five and they all support each other. My role was to set it up and get someone to run it. Anyway, when I came back, I set up a microcredit project in the East End of London. It lasted 10 years (although I only ran it for a few years and then handed it on).

Guided by synchronicities

Timestamp: 11:03

After that the work later took me to Madagascar, South Africa, Ghana, wherever I was asked to go. I said at the beginning that it's very much through other people that we get guided, and one of the ways we get guided is by synchronicities. I read a rather nice quote saying that coincidence is God's way of being anonymous. And the synchronicities that started me off going to these other places were quite extraordinary; I'll tell you about Madagascar.

I picked up a copy of Metro, the free paper, and I saw an ad for someone to go and work on sustainable income development. And I thought, oh, wow, that sounds like microcredit. I contacted them and it wasn't a good fit, but suddenly 'Madagascar' was everywhere. I was sorting out Westminster Meeting's Library, and there was a book, *100 Years of Friends' Work in Madagascar*. I talked to a friend, and she said, 'oh, both my sons are married to Malagasy women.'

And then finally, I heard about this orphanage in the capital of Madagascar, it was for women, for girls. And when they got to 18, they were very worried about how they were going to earn a living. So I mentioned microcredit, and they asked me to come. I went for about six weeks and trained up a local person to run it, which is what I did in each of those countries.

Working with prisoners

Timestamp: 13:10

As I said, I worked with homeless people a lot at the beginning, and I remain very upset by homelessness in London. And it occurred to me that I needed to go and work in prisons, because so many of these people on the streets came out of prison homeless, very often went back into prison. And I thought, if we could stop people being homeless on release, then, you know, maybe we could make a difference.

I did a little bit of work. I went to be a visitor at Pentonville Prison in London, and when I was living in Dorset for a while, I rang up the chaplain there and said, 'could I visit the prison,' and he said, 'what makes you ask?' And I said, 'well, I'm a Quaker.' And he said, 'oh, you're a Quaker, come and join the chaplaincy team.'

So I did that for a while, but then someone said to me 'what about the Prison Reform Trust?' And I said, 'what about them?' And they said, 'well, they might value a volunteer'. So I thought, okay, I'll contact them. But before I did, another of these amazing coincidences. I picked up a copy of The Big Issue and saw a piece about one of their staff who was moving from The Big Issue - about homelessness - to the Prison Reform Trust. So I contacted her and discovered that they were about to start a campaign for trying to stop homelessness on release from prison.

I'd expected to be asked to answer the phone or open the post or something, but no, they said, 'would you like to do a scoping study?' Well, I had no idea what a scoping study was! I said, 'well, perhaps you could show me one of your old ones so that I know the kind of thing that you like.' Anyway, it involved me ringing up governors all over the country, and that was the beginning of that campaign. It was the beginning of six years' work with the Prison Reform Trust, first as a volunteer and then paid.

I did a resettlement needs analysis at Chelmsford Prison, and a wonderful year in Holloway Prison working with staff and the inmates, trying to see how the women could take more responsibility in prisons so that they wouldn't be so institutionalised when they left. There was a very forward-looking governor, and it was an extraordinary year. Sadly - I mean, I never say sadly about closing a prison, because I don't like them - but of all the prisons, Holloway was a good one.

A windfall: money to enable the enablers

Timestamp: 16:15

In 2013... I'd been left some money - I sat with this for a while - and in 2013 at Yearly Meeting there was some ministry, I think it was prepared ministry, about the importance of money and how it can make a difference in the world.

I suddenly thought, well, I have this money. I had been lucky enough to be able to change my life; I'd been able to afford to make the transition. And I had a friend, a Quaker friend, who also had changed her life to work with people in need, but she'd had to take a loan from her father because she couldn't afford to do it. And I thought, wouldn't it be great to give out small grants to individuals who want to change their life in order to work with people in need, but can't afford to do so?

So, I started Open Wing Trust, which does just that. It's to enable the enablers. I started it in 2013, and it's still going (I let go of it a couple of years ago). It's given out grants to a whole range of people. To a man in prison who wanted to be a music therapist, we gave him a keyboard. To a man who had been in knife crime and wanted to stop other people doing so, he wanted to set up a course. To a couple of Quaker women who wanted to be doulas, [to] support women at the end of life. A whole range of things.

Building peace by working for justice and equality

Timestamp: 18:14

So, what has all this to do with peace? We work for peace in many ways. And in fact, when I was involved in Quaker Quest - the outreach team - one subject area was peace. And when we had speakers on peace, I heard of all the various ways in which people work for peace. And of course, peace starts within. And we build peace through working for justice and equality.

When I discovered AVP - Alternatives to Violence Project - in 2002 I learned so much. I see to my amazement, I was involved with it for 17 years. I hadn't realised it was so long! AVP started in the States when prisoners in a New York prison - older prisoners - contacted local Quakers and asked if they could come and help with the problems they were having with very violent younger prisoners. So that's how it started. It started as a Quaker thing. It no longer is; it's secular, and is in over 80 countries. It's in Sudan, Rwanda, Ukraine, Russia... I have friends who are trying to establish it in Lebanon and Jordan, all over the place.

It's a remarkable program. Again, equality is at the heart of it. We all start in exactly the same way. It's a workshop-based experiential project. So you do a level one and then you can do a level 2, and when you've done three workshops, you can train to be a facilitator. And AVP is run not only in prisons, but in community. We've run it with MIND, with all sorts of organisations, and in some countries, they run it with schools.

And we all learned from each other. It wasn't anyone being in charge. I remember when I was paired up with a young offender, and we were asked to talk about a conflict that we had solved non-violently. He talked about the time he hadn't got out his knife. And I talked about the time I hadn't been sarcastic. Sounds funny, but actually, my sarcasm might have led to someone being violent.

My work today: peace vigils, workshops and writing

Timestamp: 21:03

So what do I do now? Mostly writing and running workshops. I do work with others, like Women in Black who stand in various parts of London with posters about peace - in silence. I go to a vigil outside the Home Office in London that's held once a month, organised, I think, by the Catholics (it's ecumenical). We read out the names of everybody - all the asylum seekers - who have died on their way to safety, trying to get to Europe or to Britain. Holding it outside the Home Office seems incredibly important.

I go on peace vigils, peace walks. There's going to be a Quaker-led peace walk later this month [Quaker Silent Walking Vigil for Peace, held 19 September 2026 in Central London]. I live among homeless people. They're very much my neighbours. I talk to people in the streets. And indeed, I wrote a book called *Let Me Take You By the Hand*, which was based on interviews with over 100 people who either live on the streets or work on the streets.

Finding our calling

Timestamp: 22:27

So, how do we find what it is for us to do? It's about deep discernment. And listening to nudges and synchronicities. I used to think of myself as decisive, and then I realised it wasn't about making decisions, it was about waiting for clarity. Waiting is a very difficult thing for an impatient species. But it's such a central part of the spiritual life.

We all have our own callings. There's so much to do to mend a fractured society. We can't do it all. Frederick Buechner said, ‘the place God calls you to is the place where your deep joy meets

the deep hunger of the world.' It's not about shoulds and oughts, but about that which speaks to you in the deepest part of your being - where Spirit enters in. Much of what I've been called to do, such as Microcredit and Alternatives to Violence Project, is about enabling others rather than doing things.

And looking back, I see a couple of deep learning things that have come to me. One is that we learn from those who have least, who very often are nearer to what matters, more in touch with what matters. One of our [Quaker] advices says, 'a simple life, freely chosen, is a source of strength.' [*Advices & queries 41*.] It's important to say, freely chosen. We're not talking about enforced poverty here, but we're talking about people who happen to live simply or indeed in poverty and have a lot to teach us. I'll just give you two examples.

One night on the tea run - it was a cold winter's night - and we came across a woman in a very flimsy dress, in her 50s, I guess. And she wanted a blanket, and we didn't have one, we'd run out. A young man further along the road called out, 'she can have mine.' I said, 'what will you do?' And he said, 'She needs it more than I do. What would life be without a little love?.' I was absolutely staggered that this should come from someone who was living on the streets.

And the other thing that comes to me is a woman in a Ghanaian village. They were about to get electricity for the first time. They had a generator which made an awful lot of noise, and people were worried about the idea of electricity. And I said, 'why do you need electricity?' She said, 'so that I don't trip over in the dark when my torch runs out, and so my granddaughter can do her homework.' Very basic needs.

Knowing when to let go: learning from Quaker appointments
Timestamp: 26:05
And the other thing, it's about letting go. Quaker appointments are usually for a limited time. That's a very important way to run things, so that we pass on the baton to someone who can perhaps bring fresh things. To everything a season, a time to take things up, and a time to let things go. I've let go of my agency, of the mobile library, of Street Cred in the East End, and Open Wing Trust. It's been important to me to pass on the baton.

If anyone had told me all those years ago that I would do anything that I've done in the last 30 years, I would never have believed them. And it's all come from Quakers. Could have been another organisation, but, that's what my experience was. We need to persist in saying, 'I am a Quaker and this is my ministry.' Thank you, Friends.