

Historic Quaker 'Justice Service'

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High Sheriff of Buckinghamshire 2023-24

As the 798th High Sheriff of Buckinghamshire and the first ever Quaker, I organised a unique 'Justice Service' recently at the 17th-century Jordans Meeting House in Buckinghamshire, described by Simon Jenkins in his book *England's Thousand Best Churches* as the Westminster Abbey of Quaker meeting houses.

As for all High Sheriffs this served as the annual 'service' to mark the ceremonial opening of the court services at the start of the judicial year in autumn – the tradition dating from the 12th century, when the proceedings of the assizes began with a church service. My Quaker Meeting for Worship was attended by the Lord-Lieutenant, judges, bishops, clergy, the chair of the magistrates' bench, town and city mayors and my colleague High Sheriffs from adjacent counties, all of them resplendent in their court dress and official robes. As at my Declaration of Office at the start of my year in March, I also invited a wide range of people from across the community in Buckinghamshire, giving prominence to the work of the police, the probation and prison services, the emergency services and the crime prevention and reduction agencies.

My theme for the Quaker Meeting for Worship was 'When Mercy seasons Justice'. High Sheriffs' services normally take place in traditional churches, but I was determined to use my own Quaker heritage for this important occasion in the shrieval year and chose Jordans, the historic Buckinghamshire meeting house which is also the burial place of William Penn. With the support of Friends from both Area Meetings involved (Chilterns AM and Luton & Leighton AM) a programmed Meeting for Worship was devised. For most of the 100 or so people present this was their first introduction to a Quaker Meeting and, indeed, to significant periods of silence – many subsequently expressed appreciation of the 'unusual' experience and said they had been 'moved' by it. The venue was described as 'exceptional', 'a beautiful, peaceful and dignified place', and the periods of silence as 'unique and moving' and 'a revelation'.

Two Quakers acted as elders for the Meeting which began with representatives



Above: With the Countess Howe (Lord-Lieutenant), members of the judiciary and representatives from many fields and faith traditions
 Right: Inside Jordans Meeting House for the 'Justice Service'
 Below: With Simon Muir (Berkshire), Sally Scott (Oxfordshire) and Liz Green (Hertfordshire)



from eight different faith traditions, including a representative of 'No Belief', offering brief reflections on the theme of mercy and justice from their own tradition. The programmed Meeting also included hymns, readings and periods of silence and closed with an unaccompanied voice singing 'How Can I Keep From Singing?'. The programme and a gallery of pictures can be found on the High Sheriff's website (www.highsheriffofbuckinghamshire.com).

The main speaker was the Right Reverend James Jones, former Bishop of Liverpool, who has recently published a book *Justice for Christ's Sake*. The Right Reverend Dr Alan Wilson, Bishop of Buckingham, acknowledged the history of Jordans by prefacing his

opening remarks with gratitude for 'this extraordinary and holy place'.

Quakers present did wonder what some 17th- and 18th-century Friends might have thought of this occasion and hoped they would grasp the healing intention behind it.

In my year in office, I have prioritised two main areas of activity: the climate crisis and sustainability; and the reduction of domestic abuse and the prevention and elimination of violence against women and girls (VAWG).

