

Report of NYYM Representatives To the FUM Board Spring Sessions, 2008

We have participated in numerous conversations across this Yearly Meeting about FUM (Friends United Meeting). Friends have expressed grave concerns about the sexual ethics portion of the personnel policy, hurtful statements made at the General Board meeting a year ago in Kenya, and the affirmation of the Richmond Declaration as the faith basis for FUM, which happened at that meeting. Behind these concerns we have often sensed the implicit assumption that we are not doing anything to address the causes of these concerns, or are somehow not adequately “speaking Truth to power,” or else we would be seeing some change and movement in these areas that are painful and challenging to many Friends in this Yearly Meeting. From the tenor of those conversations we have realized that we have not done a good job in communicating to this body what it is we have been doing on all of our behalf. We will endeavor to do a better job of that in the future.

Currently, the FUM General Board has reached a significant impasse on finding unity on our understanding of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgendered and Queer personhood and ministry. Within the context of that impasse, we, your representatives, have sought to be faithful and effective. Given the impasse, our practice as Friends is to stop and wait. But that does not mean that we have been inactive. We have been working hard to do what we can to break down the divisions on the board that make our laboring together problematic. We have been working to build relationships of friendship and trust with all parties, not hiding our concerns, but at the same time looking to where we can find common ground and trust. It was that behind-the-scenes relationship building and communication which made the passage of the minute of October, '07 denying hatred and violence towards any and all persons possible. That minute was in direct response to the homophobic remarks made at the board meeting in Kakamega and effectively communicated to FUM as a whole that that kind of rhetoric would not be tolerated.

There are severe tensions within many of the North American yearly meetings which are affiliated only with FUM. For years, the FUM board meetings have been what Johan Maurer, former FUM general secretary, called a “proxy battleground” for those yearly meetings wrestling with their diversity of theology and culture. Friends from those yearly meetings have often come up to representatives from the united yearly meetings in one – on-one conversations, thanking us for continuing to bring up the hard issues that we have advocated for, saying “we don’t dare speak out.” Consequently, the more liberal united yearly meetings have become identified as “the problem” within the organization by some Friends who hope to revive FUM through instituting theological purification of a sort.

As we have been clear to step back from pushing hard on a situation that is clearly polarized and intransigent, the liberal and centrist elements within the yearly meetings affiliated only with FUM, have begun to find their voice and to speak out. So some of the

systemic conflict is being moved from the “proxy battleground” back to the yearly meetings where they are having to work through their own lack of unity. So our faithful response to hold still and hold back in a deadlock is bearing fruit, albeit slowly.

At the same time, the few Friends on the board who understand theological homogeneity and what they call “moral purity” to be the means to the revival of FUM have continued to try to institutionalize homophobia. Our work has been to resolutely reject the various maneuvers in this direction, while at the same time not losing our center or escalating the conflict. We can assure you that there has not been a board meeting in recent years when, either implicitly or explicitly, the personnel policy has not come up. And there is no doubt to those present where we stand on this issue.

Finally, we continue to seek a way forward out of the impasse we are in. We are clear that intervisitation, the sharing of our time in worship together without agenda, is one important part of how to move forward, and we have been and will continue to advocate for a program within FUM which supports that kind of crucial bridge-building. One form of intervisitation already under way has been the moving around of the General Board meetings to different yearly meetings affiliated with FUM. Last fall, we met at Woolman Hill. We are scheduled to meet at Powell House in February of 2010.

In many of the conversations we have witnessed in this yearly meeting about the conflicts within FUM, we have been clear that partial and inaccurate information has served to exacerbate an already inflammatory topic. To help us all in our discernment on how to be in relationship with the rest of FUM, we have assembled a number of documents on the NYYM website, under the Nurture section, in two places. One is under the heading Friends United Meeting, and the other under Minutes on Gender Issues. We will continue to add useful information to this site. We urge Friends to read it. It is not a good use of our collective time to have lengthy conversations based on partial or inaccurate information, a lot of which has been circulating on the web for some time.

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