

Friends United Meeting General Board, Richmond, IN, October 9–11, 2008

Report from NYYM representatives to the FUM Board: Christopher Sammond, Steve Ross, Beatrice Beguin

The FUM General Board met in Richmond, Indiana in October 2008 in a spirit of worship and caring respect. There were Friends from Canada, New England, Baltimore, North Carolina, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, and California. Representatives from NYYM included Christopher Sammond, Steve Ross, and Beatrice Beguin. Carol Holmes is the new recording clerk for the Board and so was also present. The meeting was held at Quaker Hill conference center. The setting and fellowship was that of a retreat, with worship, meals, conversation, and singing together. There were facilitated informal discussions about hot-button issues that divide Friends in FUM, and opportunities to meet one another face to face and in person. A loving spirit prevailed. Sylvia Graves, FUM General Secretary, spoke on many issues. Her commitment and leadership are clear and strong. She bears the responsibility of managing the ten FUM staff members in Richmond, is the manager of Kenyan field staff John Muhanji and Eden Graves, and also FUM staff at Ramallah Friends School, and in Belize, and other projects in Kenya.

There was a very different tone to this General Board meeting than those of the past many years. We labored together to see if we could approve a personnel manual, including the sexual ethics policy which is so difficult for many of NYYM Friends. The board tried to find a third way to either not having it or having it in the manual, and that was done in a good spirit. Also, we began work on creating an intervisitation program which might help us get to a point where we could labor effectively with each other.

The new presiding clerk of the board, Kelly Kellum, is pastor of High Point Friends Church where the 2008 FUM Triennial was held in July. He is a gifted clerk, calm and centered. He brings his own background as son and grandson of Friends who served as missionaries in Kenya, where he lived as a child. There were no Kenyan Friends at this meeting because of the cost of travel. Kenyan FUM board members hold their own meetings and submit written reports. A combined general board meeting is planned in Kenya in 2010. We acknowledged the absence of Kenyan Friends. There were no direct contacts with anyone in Kenya except a phone call about plans to sign a legal agreement about FUM's renewed support of the Kaimosi hospital. That meeting did not happen because the truck John Muhanji was using broke down. This illustrated an urgent need for a working vehicle in Kenya.

Each board member was assigned to at least one committee. General sessions included reports about work being done in Kenya and elsewhere. FUM staff reviewed budgets and fundraising. This included a direct appeal to each board member to make a personal financial commitment to the Richmond office to help keep the staff in place. The personnel manual was on the agenda on the final afternoon. Some Friends were clear in their inability to pass this draft of the personnel manual with the language from the 1988 minute regarding sexual ethics intact and not appended somehow. Other Friends were clear that they were not able

to pass the manual without that policy, and were concerned that proposed language to name the lack of unity of the board regarding the policy would leave the organization open to a discrimination lawsuit. Friends were open to finding a way forward. For a number of reasons, the board decided to submit the entire manual for legal review by attorneys who have credentials in labor law, equal employment opportunity law, immigration law, and Indiana State law. FUM receives grants from the US Federal government for American Schools and Hospitals Abroad (ASHA). The attorneys will be asked to address the possibility that the personnel policy statement may be in violation of Federal law as it applies to these grant funds. The attorneys' report and the personnel manual will be brought before the general board again in February or July 2009.

The NYYM delegation was well received at the FUM sessions. We were treated in a friendly manner, and our views and those we represented on behalf of NYYM were heard and respected. There was a small measure of defensiveness among a handful of board members who may no longer feel as secure as they once did about the organization's adherence to its traditional views on authority and doctrine, or maybe about their own role as part of a predominant culture in the organization.

Board members were inclined to be "tender" with one another. It is uncertain how long the controversial "hiring provision" will remain as part of the personnel policy, but it sticks out as an oddity. Not only do many Friends think it is wrong, but more and more clearly, it has nothing to do with actual or prospective job performance, workplace discipline, or communications. Larger numbers of people are now recognizing this, including some among the younger generation of Kenyan Friends.

FUM as an organization has recognized that it is at an early stage of recovering from a period of poor management and beginning to come to grips with what it means to take another culture seriously at the organizational and management/policy level. These things coincide at least in part with the practical side of "we easterners" being well received. What we can bring from our own experience of other cultures, as well as what we might have learned through our professions or businesses, seem to be increasing in perceived value. Our collective ability to talk religion in biblical and historical terms helps too. For FUM, financial resources are a problem. To some degree, this can be attributed to past decisions made by the board on how fundraising would be structured, and to the board's apparent inability to see itself as taking a more active role in resource development. This will need ongoing thought, effort, and Spirit-led work.