

NEW YORK YEARLY MEETING
Spring Sessions
April 4–5, 2009
Friends Academy, Locust Valley, New York

Saturday, April 4, 2009

Ernestine Buscemi, Clerk
Heather Cook, Assistant Clerk
Elaine Learnard, Recording Clerk
Jeffrey Aaron, Reading Clerk

2009-04-01. The meeting gathered in rich silence. A message was offered asking that we hold in the light those in the communities near Binghamton, NY as they come to terms with the death by violence of 14 people in a public building and that we in all our communities consider how we view “the other.”

2009-04-02. The Clerk spoke of getting a message, clearly and persistently, that we must, in this time of economic stress and difficulty in the world, slow down, sink deeper and deeper, so that we can hear what we are being asked to do. She said that as we approach our work today, we will hear it, sit with it and as we go slowly through, we will do what God wants us to do. Let those in the room take back to those not sitting in the room the work that is ahead of us. These are trying times, we are Friends of the Truth and we have hope.

2009-04-03. The Clerk introduced the clerks’ table and outlined the order of worship.

2009-04-04. The reading clerk read a Minute of Endorsement from Central Finger Lakes Monthly Meeting, for Astuti Bijlefeld, a long-time member, who has worked as a chaplain at St. James Mercy Hospital in Hornell, NY since 2003. Astuti has become a member of the Association of Professional Chaplains and is now considering working in the Veterans Health Administration hospitals in the area. She recognizes the spiritual as well as the psychological and physical wounds of war that may affect veterans in these institutions and feels a calling to help in the role of chaplain. She sees this as work for peace. Central Finger Lakes Meeting commits to continue reflecting with her on her response to her calling. This minute was approved by the Farmington-Scipio region on January 17, 2009. Friends endorsed the minute from Central Finger Lakes Meeting and also approved that the Clerk shall complete and file the forms required to meet the requirements of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), and carry out the following responsibilities indicated by the VA:

Register with the VA that New York Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends is a legitimate religious organization, and renew this registration every three years; provide each year a listing of individuals endorsed by NYYM for VA Chaplaincy to the VA National Chaplain Center; and agree that NYYM will notify the VA National Chaplain Center of any withdrawal of any ecclesiastical endorsement.

2009-04-05. Christopher Sammond (Bulls Head-Oswego), NYYM general secretary, offered a report that was a message about our condition. He said, in part, that “We are growing together into one body. We are healing. We are opening. We are deepening. We are coming together.”

He told us that he still experiences us as being in the pausing point that he named at our Fall Sessions, not a place of inactivity, but one of fruitful pause:

- We have been looking at our conflict and owning that.
- We have been looking at our children and owning them.
- We have been looking at our young adults, and owning them.
- We have been looking at how we care for our aged, and owning

them.

We have been looking at our spiritual diversity, and owning that about ourselves.

We have been looking at our racism, and owning that that is part of who we are.

We have been looking at how we are related to the rest of FUM, and what this teaches us about ourselves and how to be peace-makers.

We have work to do in more fully owning that our Friends who are currently or formerly incarcerated are a part of us. We had 9 and now have 11 and soon will have 12 prison worship groups or preparative meetings, and this is a vital part of us and we have not been acting as if this is true. We have work to do there, to fully own these Friends as being a part of who we are.

He told us that he has been having a pull to talk about overfunctioning/underfunctioning systems, though that sounds dauntingly clinical. This occurs when one or more people are feeling overburdened, overwhelmed, put upon, resentful at carrying the whole load, or too much of it and a larger group of people feel a little or largely out of it, shut out or left out of the process, not feeling a way in to use their gifts or energy. And they feel resentful. He suggested that if these descriptions sound like you or your meeting or your committee, perhaps it is time to name what you are experiencing. Friends received this report.

2009-04-06. The Clerk introduced Susan Bingham (Montclair), NYYM Treasurer, who provided the 2008 year-end Treasurer's Report: January 2008 opening balance was \$203,422; budget was \$537,400; receipts were \$522,563; disbursements were \$521,969; the closing balance was \$204,004; and the net change was +\$594. This report is available on the Web site.

She then gave the February 2009 Treasurer's Report: the January opening balance was \$204,004; budget was \$540,825; receipts were \$36,870; disbursements were \$67,619; the closing balance was \$173,255; and the net change was -\$30,750. This report will be on the Web site shortly. Friends received the Treasurer's reports.

2009-04-07. Paula McClure (Montclair), clerk of General Services Coordinating Committee (GSCC), brought a minute for consideration and offered some background. All of the Yearly Meeting's accounts, with the exception of the Mosher Fund accounts, are included within either the treasurer-managed accounts or the NYYM Trustee accounts. This makes it possible to conduct comprehensive yearly independent audits of both treasuries and all Yearly Meeting monies. The Mosher Fund was not included in this arrangement because it was thought to involve many transactions and a relatively small amount of money and would put too much burden on the Yearly Meeting office. In the past few years it has become apparent that not only would we be able to include the Mosher Fund transactions within the treasurer-managed accounts but that we would no longer have the need to conduct a separate audit of these funds. Audits are conducted both for the protection of the treasurer and of the Yearly Meeting; it should be noted that the treasurer of the Mosher Fund has done an excellent job for many years.

The General Services Coordinating Committee recommends to the Yearly Meeting that the action proposed by the Audit Committee regarding the transfer of monies from the Committee for the Expenditure of the H.H. Mosher Fund's treasurer to the NYYM Treasurer as a treasurer-managed account (which would not be part of the Operating Budget) be approved. We further recommend the establishment of a Mosher Fund account line to receive and disburse monies for this account. Friends approved these actions.

2009-04-08. Paula introduced Heloise Rathbone (Brooklyn) who reported for the Personnel Committee. Christopher Sammond had asked to have the ministerial nature of the work he does in his role as general secretary acknowledged at an institutional level by the Yearly Meeting, so that he is eligible to use the alternate set of tax codes available to individuals who work in a ministerial capacity for different religious institutions, as part of his effort to reduce the amount he pays for war and its accompanying horrors. These alternate tax rules allow for some of an individual's compensation to be in the form of a housing allowance, which is not subject to federal income tax. (That same portion is then not eligible for employer contributions for social security; the employee must pay for that out of pocket.) While we acknowledge that as Friends we all minister to each other, not all Friends are paid for their ministry. Christopher made it clear to us that he is not seeking to be recorded as a minister. The request for this change in the written job description has been discussed by the General Secretary's Supervisory Task Group and on December 11, 2008 that group approved a minute supporting Christopher's request and stating that "The Task Group is in unity that the position of general secretary is ministry as understood by Friends" and requesting addition of language to this effect to the general secretary's job description. The request has been considered by the General Services Coordinating Committee and vetted by the clerk of the Ministry Coordinating Committee. It was clear to the Personnel Committee that they support the witness that prompted Christopher to seek this designation. Equally important, the committee was clear that making such a designation was an accurate portrayal of the work he has been doing with us. The Committee will make this report available on the Web site and asks that Friends consider this request prayerfully in preparation for consideration of a minute on this matter at Summer Sessions in 2009.

2009-04-09. Susan Bingham reported for the Personnel Committee that they have adopted changes in the level of health insurance coverage for NYYM staff to reduce the costs of benefits, effective January 2010. Deductibles will be increased from \$250 to \$400, spousal coverage will be reduced from 100% to 50% and the option of a flexible spending account will be offered.

2009-04-10. Heather Cook (Chatham Summit), NYYM assistant clerk and clerk of the Steering Committee for the Meetings for Discernment reported on the recent meeting. On Saturday, March 14th, 106 Friends from 44 meetings and worship groups gathered in Poughkeepsie Friends meeting house for a day of extended worship and discernment. Friends were asked to consider "What is your sense of how Spirit is moving in your meeting or worship group?" Just over half of the group was there by appointment from their meeting. Twenty-two Friends from around the yearly meeting served as elders, holding the group in prayer and helping us stay grounded. Two Friends recorded their sense of the themes that rose up in the spoken messages. The meeting was clerked by Heather Cook of Chatham Summit as assistant clerk of the yearly meeting. Angi York Crane of Dover-Randolph and Mary Kay Glazer of Ticonderoga served as assistant clerks. The hospitality that Poughkeepsie Friends worked hard to provide was deeply appreciated. We settled into silent worship for an hour before Friends spoke to their perception of the condition of their faith community. We were privileged to gather, to listen deeply to Spirit speaking through each other, to honor the joys and concerns that were raised up about our communities. At times our collective energy flagged, but on the whole the six hours we spent in worship passed without our noting its passing. We received some powerful ministry. Themes that rose up conveyed meetings' difficulty in naming and being transformed by conflict; disagreement with Friends United Meeting's personnel policy while feeling love and unity with Friends who uphold it; a sense of optimism and renewal, of being called to greater faithfulness; and of wondering how to share what we are given with the wider world. In response to what was heard during the meeting, the Committee on Conflict Transformation sent a letter to the participants, speaking of the importance of conflict in spiritual growth and offering listening, support, and training. The meeting approved the nominations brought forward by the naming committee of five Friends to start service on the steering committee. They are Janet Hough (Chappaqua) serving 3/2009-7/2009; Ann Davidson (Farmington) and Bill Webb (Butternuts) both serving 7/2009-7/2011; Carolyn Emerson (Conscience Bay) serving 3/2009-7/2012; and Lu Harper (Rochester) serving 7/2009-7/2012.

The next meeting for discernment is scheduled for Tuesday, July 21st, at Summer Sessions in Silver Bay, NY. These extended meetings continue to offer opportunities for individual growth through deep worship and listening, and for our deepening as a gathered people. Friends received this report.

2009-04-11. Helen Garay Toppins (Morningside), coclerk of the Prisons Committee, spoke about the work of the Prisons Committee on the parole system. A Minute on Parole has previously been approved (Minute 2007-04-06, approved April 14, 2007) and the committee has been considering how to move forward to use this minute most effectively. Recently, the committee has observed that there is a more humane attitude on the part of the state government toward those who are incarcerated. The committee has benefited from advice from a former member of a NYYM prison worship group who is on the White House Criminal Justice Summit Planning Committee. They have identified the following concerns that should be included in discussions of parole:

1. Definitive parole release criteria should be established that eliminates arbitrary release decision-making and establishes specific things a person must accomplish to be released.
2. Parole preparation should begin at the beginning of a sentence.
3. Based on the pre-sentence report, a program prescription should be formulated for the person to accomplish while in prison.
4. If a person completes the prescribed program, all other things being equal, the person should be "presumed" to be granted parole.
5. A comprehensive risk assessment instrument, including the release criteria, should be created to measure progress and evaluate release eligibility.

Friends approved that the Clerk and the general secretary will write a cover letter for the minute on parole that includes these issues and will send it to the officials identified by the Prisons Committee and to faith-based communities to urge them to work toward a more humane parole policy in NYS.

2009-04-12. Boyce Bengel of the Epistle Committee read extracts from the August 2008 epistle from the New England YM.

Sunday, April 5, 2009

*Ernestine Buscemi, Clerk
Heather Cook, Assistant Clerk
Karen Reixach, Recording Clerk
Rima Segal, Reading Clerk*

2009-04-13. The meeting settled into silent worship.

2009-04-14. The Clerk updated Friends on the health of our staff member Paul Busby and asked for Friends to continue to hold him in the Light.

2009-04-15. The reading clerk called the roll by regions.

2009-04-16. The reading clerk read a letter of introduction for Christopher Sammond, from Bulls Head-Oswego meeting, endorsed by Nine Partners Region. Friends approved the Clerk of NYYM endorsing the letter on behalf of the Yearly Meeting.

2009-04-17. Melanie-Claire Mallison (Ithaca), clerk of Nurture Coordinating Committee (NCC), reported that the Coordinating Committee approved the creation of two new committees under the care of NCC. She described the work of the Young Friends in Residence (YFIR) program to foster spiritual growth of teens and young adults, and brought the recommendation of NCC that the Young Friends in Residence Working Group become a committee under the care of the Nurture Section. The purpose of this committee is to establish and support a young adult intern program hosted by a monthly and/or regional meeting. The interns will design and facilitate youth conferences, as well as work with the host meeting in ways to be determined by the needs of that meeting. The YFIR Committee will consult with General Services, New York Yearly Meeting Trustees, the Treasurer, and others on the details of creating this youth program. Friends approved the creation of this committee.

2009-04-18. The Nurture Coordinating Committee requests that a new treasurer-managed fund line, called the "YFIR Fund," be established to allow the Young Friends in Residence Committee to receive and disburse funds. This fund, under the care of the YFIR Committee, will receive grant money and other donations for the YFIR program. The committee, in consultation with the NYYM Treasurer, would determine how to distribute the funds which would be used specifically for YFIR-related intern expenses and program costs. General Services Coordinating Committee and the Treasurer have been consulted on the establishment of this fund. Friends approved.

2009-04-19. The Nurture Coordinating Committee requests that a donation line be established under the Nurture Section's "Allocations and Donations" for the YFIR Program, and that \$1000 be donated to that line, matched with a commensurate reduction in the Nurture Section Expense line, so that the 2009 NYYM Budget remains the same. Friends approved.

2009-04-20. Melanie-Claire offered the first reading of the Handbook description of the Young Friends in Residence Committee. It will be placed on the Nurture Section portion of the Consent Agenda for consideration at Summer Sessions.

2009-04-21. Nurture Coordinating Committee has co-opted the following Friends, who have served on the working group and agree to continue on the YFIR Committee as co-opted members till the 2009 Summer Sessions: Donna Beckwith (Perry City), Christine DeRoller (Old Chatham), Alexander Haines-Stephan (Mohawk Valley), Gabriel Obermayer (Binghamton Community), Amy Willauer-Obermayer (Binghamton Community).

2009-04-22. David Eskin (Purchase) brought forward a recommendation from the Nurture Coordinating Committee for the formation of a Youth Committee. Friends approved.

2009-04-23. David brought the Youth Committee description for the Handbook for first reading. He indicated that five youth have been present at Spring Sessions and have reviewed this Handbook description material.

2009-04-24. Four Friends have been co-opted by Nurture Coordinating Committee for the Youth Committee: David Eskin (Purchase), Margaret Lew (15th Street), Mary Rothschild (Brooklyn), and Peter Close (Purchase). The committee plans to co-opt youth members.

2009-04-25. Assistant Clerk Heather Cook (Chatham Summit) introduced Timothy Johnson (Schenectady), clerk of the Nominating Committee, who brought forward Lily Dahlke (Radnor, PYM),

who attends Brooklyn Meeting, as Representative from NYYM to the National Campaign for a Peace Tax Fund. Friends approved.

2009-04-26. Frederick Dettmer (Purchase), clerk of Witness Coordinating Committee (WCC), introduced a video produced by Chad Dell (Manasquan) and Patricia Chernoff (Morningside) of Friends reading the New York Yearly Meeting minute on torture approved at Summer Sessions 2008 (Minute 2008-07-53, approved July 25, 2008). This video is available on YouTube and on the NYYM Web site www.nyyym.org. The Torture Awareness Working Group asked WCC to consider a Call from the National Religious Campaign Against Torture for a Commission of Inquiry on the practice of torture by the United States. The NYYM representatives to the National Campaign Against Torture and Witness Coordinating Committee recommend that NYYM endorse this petition. Additional copies of these petitions are available from Patricia Chernoff, clerk of the Working Group; individuals and meetings are encouraged to circulate the petition for signature.

The United States must never again engage in torture. Torture is immoral, illegal and counterproductive. It causes profound and lasting harm, especially to its victims but also to its perpetrators. It contradicts our nation's deepest values and corrupts the moral fabric of our society.

We call for an impartial, nonpartisan, and independent Commission of Inquiry. Its purpose should be to gather all the facts and make recommendations. It should ascertain the extent to which our interrogation practices have constituted torture and "cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment". Understanding the causes, nature and scope of U.S.-sponsored torture is essential for preventing it in the future and eliminating it from our system without loopholes. U.S. law will determine the extent of any criminal culpability.

As people of faith, we know that brokenness can be healed—both in individual lives and in the life of the nation. All religions believe that redemption is possible. Learning the truth can set us on a path toward national healing and renewal.

The United States must never again allow itself to be driven by blinding fears and bitter resentments in responding to national tragedy. The use of torture only serves to undermine our security in a dangerous world.

Nothing less than the soul of our nation is at stake in confronting U.S.-sponsored torture and completely renouncing its use. Let the U.S. reaffirm its values by establishing a Commission of Inquiry.

Friends approved endorsing the Call and sending it to the officials who received our endorsement of the National Campaign.

2009-04-27. Greta Mickey (Central Finger Lakes), in her capacity as a person deeply concerned with peace and as NYYM Peace Concerns Coordinator, distributed a written report on her journey to the Republic of Georgia, January 20–29, 2009, in response to a request by the Tbilisi Friends Worship Group for assistance with their work in responding to the refugees from the August 2008 war, as well as their desire to obtain skills in conflict transformation. In her message to Friends assembled, she read a letter of gratitude from Friends House, Georgia:

We thank you very much for the financial help and support which you had sent to help the refugees in Georgia, via Friends House Georgia. With your funding we were able to provide aid and assistance for the refugees from South Ossetia living in the shelter "collective centers" in Georgia. We wish you success in your work and we hope that our cooperation will continue on into the future.

With great respect, Mikheil Elizbarashvili

After providing some information on Georgia, known as Sakartvelo to its citizens, she stressed how she had been moved by the power in seeing a worship group of 14 people, stepping out in faith into the work of refugee aid and conflict transformation. She was struck by the extreme poverty, especially among the thousands of refugees who live crowded into crumbling dormitories called “collective centers” often distant from sources of work and help. The UN High Commission provides food assistance. The \$3000 that NYYM World Ministries Committee sent for refugee aid was spent to provide hygiene items, diapers, and medical supplies. When a member of the worship group said that it made him feel good to help, and asked her how it felt to deliver aid, Greta replied that she too was glad to help but that “it also made me feel that I have way too much. As we left, a woman hugged me and thanked us for remembering them. I replied that I wished we could do more and, as I said it, I realized that we can.”

Resuming and expanding AVP in Georgia (Sakartvelo) was also part of Greta’s response to the requests from Tbilisi Friends. AVP was active in this area from 1995 to 2002, but is not currently active. Greta was able to meet with two Georgian AVP facilitators, who want to hold an AVP basic in April 2009. She also met with the President of South Ossetia in Exile and briefed him on AVP, expressing the hope that in time his people will sit with Georgians and learn how to use the skills they already carry within to live in peace. She received an encouraging response from him as well. Another breakaway region, Abkhazia, is not accessible to Georgians, so she hopes to reach out to AVP facilitators from Ukraine. The experience of being in this ancient and suffering land and the relationships built during her stay were compelling. Greta now hopes to return in September to continue moving forward with AVP and with supporting Friends in aiding refugees. The Witness Activities Fund and the Sharing Fund supported her January trip and will assist in the fall trip as well.

She closed by reading a report from the Friends Worship Group in Georgia, describing the use of our funds, the conditions of refugees, and their hopes for peaceful change. Friends received these reports from Greta.

2009-04-28. Naomi Paz Greenberg (Flushing), Greta Mickey (Central Finger Lakes) and Sarah Mandolang (Alfred) were named as representatives from NYYM to the interfaith gathering on peace “Heeding God’s Call” in Philadelphia January 13–17, 2009. Sarah Mandolang, who was not present at Spring Sessions, has submitted a written report to Witness Coordinating Committee; copies were available at Sessions. Naomi Paz Greenberg distributed a written report and offered some remarks on the experience.

Naomi expressed gratitude for sending the representatives to this diverse gathering, which included not only the three traditional peace churches, mainline Protestant, Catholic, black and Hispanic churches, but also Jewish and Muslim observer-participants. She described her joy that Pentecostal Christians are rediscovering their pacifist roots, the workshop on war tax witness, and the important role of Vincent Harding, a colleague of Martin Luther King, who closed each day with reflections and benediction. She indicated that the powerful plenary sessions are available on-line at <http://www.peacegathering2009.org/audio>. This Gathering was only a beginning. She plans to attend a follow-up planning session in May on next steps.

Following ministry on the Gathering, Friends received the report.

2009-04-29. The Clerk reflected that for many this is the season of Holy Week and Passover. She observed that for Friends, every day we step into these sacred waters. We seek the truth and transform from within. This time together has been a time of sinking down, slowing down, listening to that so-still voice; may it continue. The meeting moved into a period of worship beyond business.