

**General Secretary's Report
Spring Representative Meeting, 2007
Chautauqua, New York**

Tending the Garden

I want to start this report with a big thank you to all the monthly meetings which have so generously supported the work we are all engaged in as a Yearly Meeting. I know many monthly meetings stretched hard to make their covenant donations, and not a few saw clear to give well and beyond their committed amount. I am deeply moved by that show of support for the direction we are heading and the work we are committed to. Thank you.

And that direction continues to be a good one. We are continuing to address what we need to address if we are to grow into the Blessed Community we aspire to be. We are not doing this work perfectly or completely, but we are making significant progress on most of the crucial fronts. We have been witnessing the new growth cropping up all over the Yearly Meeting. We now need to tend to this garden; we need to give sustained energy and attention to new initiatives so that they do not die on the vine.

- **Strengthening Our Quarters and Regions**

We currently have six Quarterly/Regional/Half-Yearly Meetings somewhere in the process of engaging in intervisitation. This has already borne much good fruit, including youth programming, shared religious education resources, spiritual nurture, support for weaker meetings, questions about stewardship, strengthening each other's Ministry and Counsel committees, and improving a sense of regional identity.

- **Supporting Our Youth**

Youth programs are starting up literally all over the place. There are currently eight different groups in this Yearly Meeting planning or offering youth programming beyond the boundaries of a single monthly meeting. Two more quarters are in the process of setting up their own groups, as well.

- **Supporting Adult Young Friends (AYF)**

As we meet, our adult young Friends are meeting at Powell House for their second retreat in six months. There will be a consultation at Brooklyn MM for those Friends interested in starting a meeting or quarterly/regional/half-yearly AYF group. The NYYM Advancement Committee will be exploring the possibility of having a gathering of adult young Friends, high school-age Friends, and Friends from older generations, to look at issues of our different cultures and how to do a better job of sharing what is most precious in our spiritual experience with each other, across generational lines.

Helen has been working on a funding line for adult young Friends and youth programming, and we are in the process of exploring a part-time, one year internship supporting that work.

- **Our Growing Emphasis on Advancement**

Fifty Friends who have a passion for advancement and spiritual renewal met at Powell House last month for a consultation entitled “Living Our Faith Out Loud,” and came away energized, informed, and supported to do the work of advancement and renewal at local and quarterly/regional/half-yearly levels.

Many monthly meetings report a new or renewed emphasis on advancement. NYYM’s Nurture Coordinating Committee has had the first in a series of three workshops at Powell House, exploring issues integral to the advancement work of inreach and outreach: our common beliefs; our testimonies; and nurturing the life of our monthly meetings and worship groups.

- **Traveling Friends**

We currently have five Friends traveling under the auspices of Ministry and Counsel Coordinating Committee. Two more have agreed to travel, and one other is holding the question in prayer. The Traveling Friends Advisory Group is in the process of considering an additional one or two Friends for this service. Our goal is to have at least one Friend serving in each quarter, region, or half-yearly meeting. I have asked the NYYM trustees for additional funds to support this work, and they have seen clear to provide substantial additional support.

Traveling Friends are now focusing on those monthly meetings most in need of support, and are collectively strategizing how best to use our human and financial resources to support our most vulnerable communities.

- **Spiritual Nurture**

Over 120 different Friends attended one or more of the six “Drawing Out Gifts” retreats at Powell House and the regional offering of the first Gifts retreat in Farmington- Scipio, almost 100 of them from this Yearly Meeting alone. Many of these Friends attended two or more of these retreats. Feedback so far is that they have been very important to most of those Friends attending. Ministry and Counsel Coordinating Committee has appointed a task group to consider how best to support the continued growth of Friends who have experienced some deepening through these retreats.

Ministry and Counsel Coordinating Committee has also created a Spiritual Nurture Subcommittee to look at the role the Yearly Meeting might play in nurturing the spiritual life of individual members.

- **Addressing Conflict**

Several monthly meetings are actively working on conflicts in their communities. Most are doing so with the support of the Conflict Transformation Committee, Traveling Friends, and/or YM staff. These efforts are bearing slow but significant results.

- **New Worship Groups**

In the past two years, Friends have started six new worship groups. Another one is in the exploration phase. Three additional prison working groups are being requested by incarcerated Friends, with a volunteer-training session planned for this weekend to try to meet that need.

This Yearly Meeting's staff has been involved in some way in most of these good things, either by directly supporting these efforts, or through our support of those who are. Even better news is that a lot of this work was initiated without any staff support at all.

There are a remarkable number of new initiatives underway in this Yearly Meeting, a lot of new growth. As I was writing this report, the words "tending the garden" kept resonating within me. We are in a phase of tending to what we have started. If we do not tend it well, we will lose some of what we are gaining. We need to continue to bring sustained focus to the good work outlined above.

There are also some areas where, while we are doing pretty well with them, could use more focus at this time in the life of the Yearly Meeting:

- **Seasoning Newer Friends**

We have lost many seasoned Friends to death recently, and a fair number more due to conflicts in meetings. Others have moved away to retirement outside the Yearly Meeting. While our state of society reports are full of the glad news of many new members and attenders, we should not fool ourselves that having the same or greater number of Friends as before indicates that we have the same degree of spiritual depth and strength. It does not. Many meetings are hosting Quakerism 101 sessions, and more advanced learning as well. We need to continue this effort and commit to the work of deepening in our faith and practice. It is my hope that we are ready to look afresh at whether or not this Yearly Meeting has the energy for a religious education committee.

- **Becoming a Welcoming Place for Young Adults**

There is a pronounced gap in our demographics. Two or more generations are virtually missing from our ranks. Our young adult Friends have taken up their portion of this work themselves. Helen has been working with them, and with older generations of adults who carry this concern to support these Friends in taking better root in our extended community. We need to put significant energy into supporting these initiatives.

- **Teaching Our Youth Our Practice**

Many Friends speak of wanting to pass on our values to our youth. I believe that we need to not only pass on our values, but first and foremost, we need to pass on the practice which gives rise to those values.

The energy and enthusiasm we are now finding for working with our youth is truly wonderful. With all the different groups involved in youth programming, we also need a better mechanism than we have now for coordinating these efforts.

Report on Yearly Meeting Staff

Wangari Maathai, Nobel Peace Laureate and founder of the Green Belt Movement, said that “To be a woman in politics requires the hide of an elephant.” I would add that the same holds true for those of us who serve Friends in a paid capacity. If you notice your staff members beginning to look a little gray and furrowed, you might want to offer them the balm of your support or tender wishes.

I want you to know that your staff is passionate about its work, dedicated, and extremely hard-working. Paul and Helen habitually put in many more hours than the *Personnel Manual* ascribes to their positions, and have waited until slack times to take comp time for their extra work. Their level of self-sacrifice for this Yearly Meeting is beyond most people’s understanding. They are frequently involved with many tasks simultaneously, and they manage to juggle all this mostly with grace and good humor. Judy and Walter also frequently extend themselves well beyond the call of duty. Please offer any of them you see your heartfelt gratitude for their dedicated service.

By the middle of this week, your staff had caught up with the last of the lower-priority work that had to be put aside due to the circumstances around the displacement of our office, and we are grateful to be able to give more of our undivided attention to our work.

As time and our regular work flow allow, I am continuing to shift responsibilities formerly attended to by Paul and Helen, to Walter, Judy, and volunteers. My goal in this is to allow our staff the time for new initiatives without an increase in the staff budget. I especially hope to free more and more of Helen’s time up for advancement and youth work, and more of Paul’s time for assisting monthly meetings with Web site design, installation, and update.

Since I have made substantial changes in Helen and Paul’s job descriptions since I began here, I have been working with the Personnel Committee to update them so that they reflect these changes. The titles for their positions have been changed to Associate Secretary and Communications Director, respectively, to better reflect the work they are doing.

I have continued to spend as much of my time in the field as I can, visiting monthly, regional, quarterly, and half yearly meetings, worship groups, and offering retreats and workshops. To date I have made seventy-five visits to sixty-one different bodies. This is clearly the heart of my work here, and I would not have the freedom to do as much of it as my other responsibilities allow were it not for the extremely capable way that Helen manages the day-to-day office operations.

I have also been putting in significant amounts of time in working with Friends United Meeting as the organization seeks a clarified identity and direction. I do this both in my role as NYYM general secretary and as one of the NYYM representatives to the FUM General Board. This work has been very challenging and at times quite painful as FUM wrestles with core issues of its identity, amidst very challenging interpersonal dynamics. I also feel that this work is teaching me deeper levels of our faith and practice which have powerfully informed my work with this Yearly Meeting.