

## **Getting to Know Ernestine Buscemi New York Yearly Meeting's New Clerk**

This is an interview Helen Garay Toppins conducted with Ernie after Ernie became clerk of NYYM.

How did you come to know the Religious Society of Friends?

Growing up in Pittsburgh, Penn., you would think that I would have heard or known about the Quakers, but as a Catholic kid I did not. Even going off to college in the 1960s I don't remember crossings paths with Friends, even during my protesting days. I must say I did not become a seeker until I moved to Connecticut in the 1970s with two children. I was searching for more than religious dogma; there was a hunger pain that just would not go away. I began talking to people I came in contact with about my seeking. A friend told me about this small meeting of Quakers less than a quarter mile from where I lived, so that next Sunday I sat in a circle with about twenty people experiencing my first worship in the manner of Friends. I returned and sat for over a year and watched my elders in the meeting as their lives spoke daily to me and others; never realizing how I was quietly being drawn by invitations to roundtable discussion on Quaker testimonies. Someone would give me a book to read (Thomas Kelly, 300 years of Quaker history, Pendle Hill pamphlets, etc.). I observed how others spoke (who were not Quakers) about those I worshipped with on First Day; it was a most blessed time, an experience that I hold close to my heart. I was nurtured and loved into the Religious Society of Friends—a place I call my spiritual home.

What monthly meeting do you belong to?

I'm a member of Morningside Monthly Meeting (60–65 members/attenders, making us the midsize meeting in the New York Quarter). We gather each First Day at 11:00 A.M. on the 10th floor in the tower of Riverside Church. The very faint sounds of the music from Riverside's pipe organs seeps softly through the elevator shafts, floating and melding into our expectant waiting with an assurance that God is alive.

Tell us more about Morningside Monthly Meeting.

My meeting is a continuous practice in how to build and support community, allowing for all parts of life to emerge. We have a substantial core of longtime members even though we are a very urban meeting and have our share of transient seekers, college students, and people who are in town just for a very few months. Throughout our fifty years or so we have been blessed as a meeting with a gift of community that supports leadings and gifts, even as we sometimes are challenged with our diversity of theological views and language. I believe that our meeting is fully engaged in expanding our understanding of the Quaker testimonies and Quaker culture. I'm blessed to be in a meeting that continuously seeks the meaning of authority (corporate/individual), heightening our understanding of our relationship with God and life.

Can you speak a little more about Quakers and community?

I believe that as a faith community we must have what I call the “communal experience” with God at our center, which develops the heart of the vision and helps in the articulation of what God is asking of us. As we move forward and engage in conversation, I hold a vision of wholeness with love and prayer.

I see community and the communal experience bringing us all, as Quakers, into discernment around ministry, leadings, and nurturance of gifts. And when we as a faith community embrace the discernment of ministry, leadings, and nurturance, the *sense* of the communal experience happens and we are poised through worship, ready to articulate our vision of service to God.

When we experience God’s presence, we know the energy and spirit that works through us all, so our conversation, our listening, our speaking, our praying are all part of the whole. I have seen over the years how we have been honing our skills as a Yearly Meeting, one monthly meeting at a time. It is now the time to share our individual conversations and corporately strengthen the whole.

What do you believe is the role of the Yearly Meeting body?

I believe the worshipping community is the heartbeat of the vision. And holding that role first and foremost gives opportunities to fully engage in sharing thoughts and insights. I can not say this enough: Pray and pray some more. Remembering there is no “they”; there is only “we.” We are all the Yearly Meeting, we are asked to serve, we are asked to discern, and we are asked to do.

I think you nourish unity through conversation and finding the best constructive ways to help facilitate communication, leading to a very inclusive community. We are all looking for transparency and accountability in our “God conversations.” And as the monthly meetings, regions, and coordinating committees worship together and hold that relationship, there is always a delicate balance. It is not based on personality, but based on faith and a willingness to serve God, allowing things to flow by letting Spirit guide.

This conversation isn’t just about dissemination of information or opinions or a way of getting the feeling of the corporate body. I see this as a way of building community. So often, where community breaks down, it is not so much around the decisions themselves; instead it is the fact that some people’s voices were invisible in the process, so they experience imposition coming down from on high. My experience is that, when engaged and fully participating in God’s conversation, we build respect and engender trust. There is transparency about the process, and information is shared without assumptions.

In our history there have been defining events in our Yearly Meeting, and as we look back we see our faithfulness and our ability to pull together. The challenge today is to speak what God is calling us to do, and to discern how we can bring all our resources into alignment.

What do you want the NYYM family to know about you?

I want the NYYM family to know that I take my relationship with God seriously. I believe in the human spirit and that love drives us. I want the NYYM to know that I love to laugh and my cooking is a gift from God, that reading aloud with my husband is one of my life's cherished moments, and that my 11 grandchildren make me smile even as I write these words. I want the NYYM family to know that I'm here in service to God and the Religious Society of Friends and that I hold a vision of wholeness with love and prayers. I want the NYYM family to feel and know that we are connected and that we are all on the path seeking that of God in ourselves and the world.

Final thoughts:

I'm here to serve and be faithful to what I have been given to do. I love the thought that we may be able to articulate a vision that will allow for growth of our ministries. It's all about mission and ministry in the end. It's not only about bricks and mortar, it's not only about money, it's not even about the programs we have in place—although all these are important—but it's about how we continue to grow and plan as we are being called to serve.