

Worship and Action for Peace Letter, 7/08/04

Dear Friends in New York Yearly Meeting:

When you are clear about your position, expect to experience great inward power to act on it. A response that relies on this power will be courageous and without hostility. ---6th of 12 Guides to Transforming Power from the Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP)

This letter brings news in 4 items:

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Peaceable greetings,

Linda Chidsey, Vicki Cooley, Fred Dettmer, Lu Harper
NYYM Worship and Action working group

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**A. New York State Community of Churches Collegium Meeting with Governor Pataki,**  
report by Linda Chidsey, clerk of New York Yearly Meeting, who serves on the Collegium

Members of the New York State Community of Churches Collegium met with Governor Pataki and members of his staff in Albany on June 2. For the past five years we have been largely successful in scheduling an annual meeting to discuss issues of concern to the churches. Issues covered this year included criminal justice (a commitment to restorative justice, abolishing the death penalty, drug laws, funding for higher education in prison, parole reform), Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (potential reduction in cash grants, “full family sanctions” whereby benefits to children are reduced for reasons of non-compliance by parents, possible reduced benefits for families receiving SSI), and education (equity of state-wide funding, universal pre-kindergarten, adequate staffing and resources).

Often I am asked if visits of this nature are “worth it,” if our concerns are ever really heard or acted upon. This was especially true after our meeting with Hillary Clinton shortly before the Senate vote on whether to declare war on Iraq. While I expect we all experience fleeting moments of wondering whether such visits make a difference, I am thoroughly convinced that we must be faithful to the message that is given us to share; that it is our responsibility to speak the truth to power. We are not given to know all the ways our acts of faithfulness may bear fruit; however we can be assured that no action of the heart is ever wasted.

On June 2 Collegium members gathered first for lunch and for briefings around the concerns we would be bringing to the governor. We were scheduled to meet with the governor and his staff at 4:00 P.M. Conversation over lunch was lively as members caught up with one another, and then the talk turned to stories of associations and dealings with elected officials and others in Albany over the years. As the stories continued, a rising tone of agitation or “jangled-ness” could be felt among the group and a growing tone of cynicism began to creep in. I found myself becoming uncomfortable with what was happening among us and experienced a clear sense that we were losing touch with our center.

(I want to pause here to articulate why I am choosing to report on not only the “facts” and content of our visit, but also the tone and the sometimes barely conscious feelings any of us may experience when, as individuals or as a group, we set out to speak truth to power or attempt to dialogue with those whose ideas or positions differ from our own. I find myself returning to this experience in Albany as a kind of object lesson, and I am led to share it in the hope that it might be helpful to others as well.)

To continue: At a certain point in what I would characterize as the increasingly “worldly conversation” following lunch, someone asked when we were to begin the briefings. With this question, it became apparent that we had lost sight of our schedule, had lost our discipline. As we gathered up our papers and prepared to move into the adjoining room for the briefings, another person requested that we first pause and take note of what had been happening among us. She named the spirit of agitation we had been experiencing and asked that we come back to center in order to listen for what God would have us speak that afternoon in our meeting with the governor. She asked that we help one another to return to that place whenever we felt ourselves slipping and to speak from that centered place. In so doing, we would be inviting those with whom we would be speaking into that place as well. A little later someone jokingly said, “Albany is a jangled city.” We were then reminded that although that may be so, we were in Albany representing another city – a City on the Hill.

Our briefings began with silence and then vocal prayer, asking God for assistance in our intentions to speak the concerns we were bringing in both truth and love. We discussed the points we wanted to be certain to cover, information we wanted to share, how we might follow up after the meeting. In the context of discussing equitable funding for education state-wide, it became clear we were in unity that under no circumstances did we support funds raised through gambling. As we met, I could feel our more settled condition, facilitating our conversation and decision making process.

At the appointed time, we proceeded to the capitol building for our meeting with the governor. As it turned out, an unscheduled meeting with the press had come up and we were kept waiting for nearly 25 minutes. Members of Governor Pataki’s staff came in one by one over a 20 minute period, and the governor himself arrived about 20 minutes before the end of the meeting. It would have been easy to become annoyed and flustered – even angry – by this need to adjust expectations. However, that was not the case. Some spoke quietly together as we waited; one sought out and brought news from the scheduling secretary; some prayed silently, providing a non-anxious presence for the group.

I sensed an unspoken question in our group as to how we would proceed in light of the fact that staff members were arriving one by one. An unspoken decision was reached as we simply began with the arrival of the first staff member and brought the others into the conversation as they arrived.

Without providing a moment by moment description of the flow of the meeting and all its dialogue, I want to share what I both experienced and observed as a real transformation in the quality of the encounter over the period of time in which we met.

As we began, I sensed among us the feeling that we needed to hurry in order to cover all the points we had discussed. I also wondered whether just beneath the surface there might be lurking traces of attitudes such as: “we won’t be heard”; “we (the righteous) ‘get it’ and these jerks don’t and probably never will”; a tinge of awe and/or feelings of self-elevation that we were meeting with those in power; feelings of unworthiness or, conversely, feeling holier-than-thou. What I am describing is the whole gamut of feelings and attitudes to which none of us is a stranger.

Now here’s where the object lesson really begins.

Not long after we’d begun, the depth and tone of the conversation began to shift. One member of the group was led to share the ongoing tension experienced by members of the Collegium to be both practical and prophetic, to express gratitude for the steps legislators and others take toward meeting human need and working toward a more just society. At the same time, we said, we know that we are called to be in the world but not of it, and that this means we are required to speak in a prophetic voice. With that introduction, we began to do just that.

One member of the Collegium spoke eloquently of his chaplaincy work in prisons over many, many years. He shared information that supported a need for parole reform and promised to send the governor a recently published book. I felt we had reached a new level of trust in communication when an aide asked us to explain what we meant by restorative justice. The response was framed in a way that facilitated a connection between “criminal activity” with any individual’s experience of truth telling, authentic forgiveness and the restoration of relationship.

When the conversation turned to equitable funding of education across the state and how that might be brought about, we made clear our position on gambling. In short, we said, we saw the funding of education through money generated by gambling, indeed the support of gambling for any purpose, as a sign of a society’s moral decay. We expressed our desire to continue to dialogue around this issue and promised to provide data on the impact of gambling on individuals and communities. We asked, “What is the legacy we want to leave our children and grandchildren?” “What would it take for New York to assume a role of moral leadership and how might religious communities be of assistance in this endeavor?” We promised to forward the document *Interfaith Working Group Principles for Quality Education*.

We inquired as to the reasoning behind reducing benefits to a child when a parent is unwilling or unable to comply with existing regulations. We extended an invitation to visit a drug treatment program run by a member of the Collegium. We spoke about a need for “the restoration of hope.”

In our meeting with the governor we spoke truthfully and we listened respectfully. At times I experienced and observed a sense of holy empowerment that enabled us to speak boldly but without rudeness or anger. And I experienced a willingness to listen more deeply. As I reflect upon the day, I see us all as having moved from an attitude of "us and them" to one of "I and thou." As Friends, we might say that through discipline and God's grace, we were given a taste of "walking cheerfully over the earth, answering to that of God."

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## **B. Peace Tax Fund resolution in New York City Council, endorsed by NYSCC Collegium**

On June 23, the NYSCC Collegium endorsed NYC Council Resolution 367, which calls upon Congress to enact and the President to sign H.R. 2037, known as the Religious Freedom Peace Tax Fund Act. A notice to member churches follows:

### **NYS Council of Churches Endorses Resolution in Support of Peace Tax Fund Act**

As people of faith, we are called to bear witness to the dictates of our conscience, to give voice to the prophetic word. With the endorsement of a NYC resolution in support of the Religious Peace Tax Fund Act, the NYSCC has registered its voice in support of individuals, who for religious, moral, ethical or philosophical reasons conscientiously object to the use of their taxes for military purposes.

On May 19, NYC Council member Bill Perkins introduced Resolution 367, which calls upon Congress to enact and the President to sign H.R. 2037, known as the Religious Freedom Peace Tax Fund Act. H.R. 2037 would enable those who are conscientiously opposed to participation in war because of their religious, moral or ethical principles, to have their federal taxes placed in a Peace Tax Fund, which could be used for non-military purposes only. The City Council Resolution also calls upon New York's United States Representatives and Senators to monitor and report on military expenditure funded by the taxes of NYC residents. Most Americans are unaware that current allocations for military expenditures, when combined with "supplemental" appropriations for the War in Iraq, account for almost half of all federal dollars spent.

In the words of Dwight Eisenhower, Former U.S. president and army general:

*Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired, signifies in the final sense a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and not clothed.*

The Peace Tax Fund Act promises to provide a clearer picture of Americans' feeling about war and the degree to which militarization devours resources that could be used to meet human needs and create a more just society. We hold these matters to be of primary importance to the Church.

For more information about the NYC Campaign:

Phone: (212) 866-3244

Website: <http://peacetaxfund.org/nyc/>

Email: [peacetax@hotmail.com](mailto:peacetax@hotmail.com)

For more information about the National Campaign:

Phone 888-PeaceTax (732-2382)

Website: <http://peacetaxfund.org>

Email: [info@peacetaxfund.org](mailto:info@peacetaxfund.org)

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C. Peconic Bay Friends join in Independence Day parade

Southampton, NY July 5, 2004

Peconic Bay Meeting held a precedent setting event out here on the East End of Long Island today by marching in the Fourth of July parade.

The Parade out here in Southampton draws bands and marching groups from all over Long Island and is quite extensive, lasting from 10 to noon.

Since we are small in numbers as a Meeting, we approached the Unitarians of the South Fork who joined with us in the march. We numbered 43 adults, 4 children, dressed in blue tops, white bottoms, and straw hats for which we provided wide red/white/blue ribbons for uniformity.

We carried a banner that read PEACE CHURCHES CELEBRATING OUR FREEDOMS, followed by individual signs for the right to religious choice, speech, legal defense, civil liberties to name some, and then a large banner supporting our troops by... (smaller signs) not cutting veterans benefits, bringing our troops home alive, supporting soldier's families, the right to conscientious objection.

Although the signs were designed to be educational, and not incendiary, we had each participant affirm that they would not react to any negativity from the crowd. But to our surprise, there were applause and thumbs up all along the route, even in this conservative community.

It rained heavily at times, perhaps a reminder from the heavens that this was a not a good year for the ideals of democracy. Part of the crowd scurried for shelter, but undaunted, we all marched on, soggy but satisfied with our effort. Some suggested that this might be the beginning of a yearly event. Even if our corporate enthusiasm for institutionalizing it fades, this was the year to be there with a presence for peace midst the military displays that are easily mistaken for entertainment, not symbols of destruction.

On behalf of Peconic Bay Monthly Meeting, Joanna Komoska, clerk

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### **D. SOA/WHISC prisoner of conscience update, legislative alert**

New York Yearly Meeting Friends may wish to know that Shirley Way (Central Finger Lakes Monthly Meeting), who "crossed the line" in an act of civil disobedience during the School of the Americas Watch vigil last November, began serving her three-month sentence at the Federal prison in Danbury, CT, on June 22nd. More word of her experiences upcoming.

**Bob Edgar, general secretary of the National Council of Churches, forwarded the following legislative alert on July 2:**

### **THE TIME FOR LEGISLATIVE ACTION TO CLOSE THE SOA/WHISC IS NOW!**

As Reports of torture continue to surface from Iraq to Guantánamo Bay, many are surprised to learn that a U.S. Military school has taught foreign soldiers in the arts of

torture and assassination. The School of the Americas (recently renamed the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation) is funded by our tax dollars and located at Fort Benning, Georgia. The training institute has trained over 64,000 Latin American Soldiers in skills that range from torture to commando techniques. These soldiers have assassinated and tortured countless church leaders, union organizers and human rights advocates in almost every country in Latin America. The best opportunity for a vote this session to close the SOA/WHISC is coming soon! The Foreign Operations Appropriations bill is scheduled to be voted on by the full House of Representatives as early as July 19th. Historically, we have had success in our legislative efforts when a Member of Congress has introduced an amendment to that bill to cut the funds for "scholarships" for the foreign security forces attending the school, rendering it inoperable. But before that can happen, we must get 150 Representatives to co-sponsor HR 1258—the bill to close and investigate the SOA/WHISC—by July 13th.

**THE CHALLENGE:** We have until July 13th to reach our goal of at least 150 co-sponsors to HR 1258 before Rep. McGovern will move forward with an amendment.

**WHAT YOU CAN DO:** Below is a list of suggested actions, but don't be afraid to be creative!

- \* Call the Member's DC office and ask to speak with the foreign policy staffer. Be specific with your message, "I am a constituent and I am calling to urge Rep. \_\_\_\_\_ to sign on to HR 1258, the bill to close and investigate the SOA/WHISC because..."  
Capitol Switch Board: 202-225-3121.

- \* Write a letter. If you can, hand written, personal letters are very influential. Fax and/or mail a copy to the DC and district office. Then ask other people to write letters.

- \* Make an appointment(s) to visit your Rep. (or their staff) in the district office. If you weren't able to schedule an appointment, try stopping by to see if someone can meet with you anyways.

- \* Recruit other people to go on the lobby visit with you. A broad coalition of different voices-i.e. local religious leaders, labor union members, students, professors, local politicians, members/leaders of other organizations, etc-is stronger than yours alone. Get ready for your meeting by researching your Member's voting record and preparing your talking points <http://www.soaw.org/new/article.php?id=115>; New (Spring 2004) Research: <http://www.soaw.org/new/article.php?id=76>.

- \* Send a thank you letter if you meet with someone. Make sure to reemphasize key points and provide any information you said you would.

- \* Fill out a lobby report form after your visit or any lengthy phone call with a Congressional staff person. You can find a form here: <http://www.soaw.org/new/article.php?id=407>

- \* Follow-up! Offices are very busy, so it is our responsibility to stay active and keep working to get what you want, whether it be a returned phone call, your appointment, co-sponsorship and the commitment to vote.

July 19 - 23: Week of a Possible Vote

\* Look out for urgent emails from SOA Watch announcing the day of the vote so we can flood the office with calls.