

Worship and Action for Peace Letter, June 11, 2004

Some among us have questioned the value of the annual State of the Meeting report, as we don't "do" anything with it, nor do we get feedback from the Yearly Meeting, except for the combined YM report. Others maintain that it is a useful spiritual exercise in itself and an important aspect of Friends' discipline.

--from a *State of the Meeting* report

Reclaiming intermeeting connections through epistles and/or traveling ministry:

Friends in New York Yearly Meeting are hearing a call to radical peacemaking. It carries the promise (threat?) of transforming ourselves, our Religious Society, the world. To respond in honesty and full caring, truth and love, we need one another. How can we strengthen our practice of shared worship, spiritual accompaniment?

The Worship and Action Working Group, named at yearly meeting sessions in 2002, feels blessed to have been asked (from the floor at April Representative Meeting, 2004) to read the individual State of the Meeting reports and to reflect back to the Yearly Meeting where it sees the Spirit at work within the Yearly Meeting, particularly with respect to worship and peacemaking activities. We plan to give this report at Yearly Meeting sessions. In the process of our reading, we were also led to reflect upon the value and usefulness of State of Society reports (see quotation above). What has come to us is that at present Friends may be being given an opportunity to reconnect with two of our historical traditions, writing to one another and traveling in the ministry, in a way that makes them live and useful to us in these times

Epistles and State of the Meeting reports

Early Friends used many literary forms, including political and apocalyptic pamphlets; journals; testimonies (originally, accounts of the life and work of deceased friends); verse; epistles; pastoral letters of advice and encouragement (many written from prison); and ministering letters from one friend to another. Margaret Benefiel summarizes the early role of letters and epistles in her introduction to letters and epistles from women Friends recently published in *Hidden in Plain Sight: Quaker Women's Writings 1650-1700*:

Letters and epistles formed the backbone of the young Quaker movement. As a non-credal, non-hierarchical religious movement, ties between local worshipping communities were weak. Quaker ministers had no bishop to report to. Isolation, discouragement, and loss of vision constantly threatened to undo the movement. Early Friends met this challenge partly by travelling in the ministry. However, travelling Friends could not cover all the territory nor could they travel frequently enough to keep meetings current with each other's status and needs. Furthermore, during times of intense persecution, the travelling ministry was often severely curtailed. Letters and epistles supplemented travels, covered the large territory that travelling ministers could not, and got through in times of persecution. Through letters friends offered encouragement and exhortation to individual meetings and also kept meetings in touch with one another. These letters and epistles wove the ties of community both within meetings and throughout the Religious Society of Friends.

...The women who wrote the letters included here had a strong sense of corporate unity with other Friends. For them, coming to the Light meant not only a personal transformation, it also meant initiation into a group of believers. In fact, the personal transformation could only happen, in their view, in the context of such a group. This group was referred to by them as the body of Christ or Christian community. Quakerism was not an individualistic faith. Quakers trusted God's Spirit to draw each person into her place in

the community and expected her and her gifts to flourish in the context of being loved, loving, and serving in that body. The individual became fully herself only as she experienced her connection to the community. To be cut off from the body was to lose one's source of life and to wither and die spiritually. (p.443–44)

In the Quietist period, some Quaker literary forms became part of a control structure: for example, monthly meetings were expected to respond to queries sent by superior meetings. John Punshon suggests that "the questions implied what the acceptable answer was, and thus came to be a good indicator of what Quaker values were." Advices became formalized out of previously less systematic responses to meetings from yearly meetings, first appearing in a collected form in London Yearly Meeting in 1827. Punshon summarizes: "So the Yearly Meeting emerged as a curious legislative body which became more concerned with the internal management of the Society than its relations with the wider world." There was also an implied understanding of a hierarchical relationship between yearly meeting, regional or quarterly meetings, and monthly meetings.

Today, monthly meetings in New York Yearly Meeting are asked to respond to queries with State of the Meeting reports, which are sent to quarterly or regional meetings and to Yearly Meeting; read and summarized by Ministry and Counsel; and in case of Yearly Meeting, placed into binders available for any at annual sessions to peruse should they have the time or the inclination. The monthly meeting may choose to follow up on issues raised in the State of Society Report. Follow-up from regional or Yearly Meeting Ministry and Counsel on issues raised in the State of Society reports may be little (i.e., a summary); generalized (i.e., workshops at quarterly meetings or at Powell House); or individualized (i.e., correspondence, visitation); depending in part upon the strength, leadings and availability of members of Ministry and Counsel. While we no longer implicitly understand a hierarchical relationship between meetings, our committee structure may lead us to act as if there is a hierarchy. There is currently little discipline related to internal management of the society that travels from the Yearly or regional meeting to the monthly meetings, but may concerns expressed by monthly meetings have gone unanswered? Our current structure for dissemination of State of Meeting reports funnels the reports to ever smaller circles. What opportunities for interconnection and ministry might result if state of society reports were disseminated and read widely? Might meetings and/or Friends not involved in regional or Yearly Meeting Ministry and Counsel also be led to reach out to one another?

Traveling in the Ministry

While structural formalization was taking place among Friends during the Quietist period, at the same time the tradition of the travelling ministry was maintained—particularly in the conservative and orthodox branches of Friends. Lloyd Lee Wilson, from the conservative tradition, describes the role traveling in the ministry played among Friends historically, and the role it might serve today:

The role of Friends in previous centuries who traveled from meeting to meeting "under a religious concern" as an instrument for building up the Religious Society of Friends is often overlooked or underappreciated today, but their example and experience is very relevant to our present-day condition and needs. Unprogrammed Friends today face challenges similar to those of an earlier day as they cope with large numbers of small, new meetings, many without a core of seasoned Friends and most located several hours drive or more from the nearest larger, older monthly meeting. Traveling Friends of earlier generations served to knit together similarly isolated meetings into a larger society of Friends, to build up individuals and meeting communities in the faith, to answer questions about faith and practice, and to provide an opportunity for evangelizing in the local community. Traveling Friends can perform the same functions today, if we understand how Friends of an earlier time came to feel led to travel in the gospel ministry, how they were supported by their home meetings, and how the meetings they visited made use of

the opportunities presented by their visit. (Lloyd Lee Wilson, chapter on "Traveling in the Ministry," *Essays on the Quaker Vision of Gospel Order*, p. 115)

Lloyd Lee Wilson's essay speaks to the distinction between traveling in the ministry and traveling with a concern:

The leading to travel in the gospel ministry differs from the desire to visit Friends in distant places in its focus on God's activity and work rather than our own. My expression of this has been that if I am faithful and undertake this journey, something good will happen. What that good thing is, I do not know in advance and may never know at all; but somehow, by making myself available for God's use through this journey I will help that good thing occur. In this lack of humanly perceived purpose the gospel journey is in contrast to travel under a specific concern, such as war tax resistance, unity with the earth, or similar issues. Travel under such a concern may indeed be a ministry and may be deeply Spirit-led, but it is distinct from travel in the gospel ministry in just that sense of the traveler having something, knowledge or perspective or spiritual insight, to impart to or share with those visited, as well as a desire that the Friends visited might come to share the specific concern that burdens the traveler. (Chapter on "Traveling in the Ministry," *Essays on the Quaker Vision of Gospel Order*, p.118-119)

William Taber offers a description of the work of the traveling minister:

The "awefulness" of becoming a minister lay partly in the high expectations which the Friends placed on their ministers, for they expected everything and nothing all at the same time. Ministers were to do *everything* which the Light, the Master, the Guide, the Heavenly Father (to use some of the various names) required of them; they were supposed to follow every intimation and speak every word given them in the light. Thus mothers or fathers might have to leave family, work, and friends for years while they traveled, not knowing when the Spirit would allow them to return. On the other hand, *nothing* was expected of them if they felt no immediate leading, nor, of course, could they ever prepare for any sermon. Thus each new meeting, each new family visit was a fresh test of faith in which one might be called to rise without knowing what was to be said, or what difficult or perplexing words might come forth; even worse, a well-known minister might be required to remain silent throughout a meeting called just for him. (in "The Theology of the Inward Imperative: Traveling Quaker Ministry of the Middle Period," *Quaker Religious Thought*, Autumn 1980, p.8)

Wilson discusses the discernment process undertaken by a friend with a call to travel in the ministry and their monthly meeting, and the discipline maintained by the minister, her monthly meeting, and the meetings that she visits. Only in recent years are FGC Friends rediscovering the discipline and benefits to meetings of friends traveling with a concern or traveling in the ministry (see the Web site for FGC's Traveling Ministries Program, <http://www.fgcquaker.org/traveling/>). While the descriptions above of the traveling ministry are made in the Christian vocabulary of the conservative tradition, a traveling friend today, listening to the Spirit, may hear or be moved to speak using language that acknowledges and includes all our diversities. Whatever the language used, individual friends and meetings may be opened by having their condition listened or spoken to.

Our community today is more theologically diverse than that of early Friends, but our need for connection is still as strong, and the dangers of isolation still great. Monthly meetings are our center and our strength, but they are by and large unconnected with each other, and vary widely in their resources and capabilities. Not all meetings may have the resources to provide opportunities for spiritual support and growth within the meeting itself; in which case Friends may look primarily to outside sources. Yet, not all Friends can easily take advantage of opportunities offered by Powell House, Pendle Hill, FGC, even if financial support is available from meetings. Do we need to facilitate such opportunities within the monthly and regional meetings?

How do we reach out to one another today? Some examples from within our Yearly Meeting include: creating opportunities at regional gatherings for meeting clerks to speak together about the condition of their meetings; meetings sharing newsletters with each other in print or online; Friends encouraging those with a concern to travel with it to large and small gatherings; inviting Friends to share their witness at meetings or regional gatherings. Some Friends have been called to increased visitation or to travel in the ministry. Some meetings and quarterly meetings have started to explore the discipline of discerning, supporting, and welcoming Friends traveling in the ministry. Looking ahead, our new general secretary will be assisting Friends and meetings in understanding and reclaiming the tradition of travel, as well as traveling and modeling this himself.

We are responsible for letting our condition be known and for being open to the movement of the Spirit in responding to others. Although we have structures in place for response to one another (i.e., State of Society reports, Ministry and Counsel), and it's important to hold up those who have taken on the weight of that responsiveness, we might usefully be reminded that the structures should not replace our individual responsibility for listening to the movement of the Spirit and moving either within or outside the structures as we are led. When we pay attention to one another, we are blessed in the work of the Spirit from which that unknown "something good" happens.