

Worship and Action Update, 1/24/03

Dear Friends in New York Yearly Meeting:

Could we be so bold as to say: "Martin would have been pleased"? We were amidst a week of activities for peace which were conducted in a spirit of faith and nonviolence. As one Friend said of the Washington, DC, demonstration, "The general mood was confidence, cheerfulness, peacefulness, and determination."

The long weekend was surrounded by a silent retreat - "An Extended Meeting for Worship" - at Powell House under the facilitation of Linda Chidsey that held us all in the Light and offered nourishment both to those in attendance and the rest of us from afar. From Linda's report:

In his essay "The Idea of a Retreat," Gilbert Kilpack speaks about how in times of sorrow and war-mindedness the necessity of making a retreat is greater than ever. "Scouting parties" must be sent out to lay hold of divine certainty, experimenters must set to work. In addition to the individual questions and concerns participants brought to the weekend, this "scouting party" at Powell House lifted up and held in the Light those Friends at the FWCC Peace Consultation, marchers in Washington, all souls engaged in peacemaking activities in these times. We felt our presence at Powell house and events going on elsewhere to be "all of a piece".

Following breakfast on Monday morning Friends gathered in worship to end the silence, then reflected on their experience and how they might carry the stillness and peace of the weekend back home to their everyday lives in family, community, the marketplace, the world and how they could return to stillness there. They spoke of not routinely turning on the TV or radio in the morning, of inviting a few Friends to sit together.

On Saturday, hundreds of thousands gathered in Washington, DC, San Francisco and cities around the globe to demonstrate their conviction that peace is the way. Many Friends from New York Yearly Meeting participated, and a few have shared some reflections. The march in Washington, DC brought together a kaleidoscopic mix of people of many races, ages and beliefs; participants seemed much more numerous than for the last large demonstration in October. Many participants carried original signs, like MORE TREES. LESS BUSH and WHO WOULD JESUS BOMB? Most appeared to be clear about the need to continue the effort at home with members of Congress, local government officials, religious leaders and friends, neighbors and strangers. One person reported:

"I looked for a quiet place in the river of people that the crowds became, once the march began, and eventually found a small group walking quietly, sometimes singing harmonized rounds of hymns amid the layers of chants that would rise and fall from the people around us. Once one of the rounds was taken up more loudly by a young man in front of us, who without looking around, passed it on so that most of the crowd within hearing was singing it. The original singers looked on with interest. They turned out to be Quakers."

On Monday, January 20th, more than 3,000 people filled the Washington National Cathedral to "Pray and Act for Peace and Justice" (a theme inspired by Rev. King's last sermon delivered at the Cathedral on March 31, 1968). After the service, many marched to the White House for a candlelight vigil. Kate Bowman, an assistant at Sojourners, posted reflections on the service and vigil; here are a few excerpts:

"Not only did we hope Dr. King's faithful politics would influence our own lives, but the life of our nation and, indeed, of all nations. We were there to remind ourselves and others that King sought not only equality but peace. We were there to hear readings from his speeches and writings, yes, and we were there to pray, but we were also there to act; to, as Episcopal Bishop John Chane put it, 'bear witness...to the importance of seeking new ways to move beyond the age-old sin of war.'

"After the service, about half of us hit the streets. Vested clergy representing more than 20 denominations and organizations led the prayerful procession, followed by a ragtag assembly of pastors, parents, nuns, teenagers, and schoolchildren, many of whom were new to the scene.

"More and more Christians are beginning to agree, viewing the administration's rush to war, and the intensified neglect of the poor here and abroad that would be its inevitable consequence, as a matter of faith. Those who showed up at Monday's service and trekked to the vigil at the White House did so because we believe that, in Bishop Chane's words, 'the real wars we must fight are against poverty, illiteracy, disease, and social injustice.' When we realize that such wars require more than skirmishes once each January, that they demand daily death to self and commitment to others, we truly begin to honor the legacy of Dr. King and the teachings of Jesus."

From Friday evening through Monday lunch, 245 Friends, including at least 50 young Friends, came together at Guilford College for the Friends World Committee on Consultation (Section of the Americas) Peace Conference - Friends' Peace Witness in a Time of Crisis. Only the fifth time in its 66-year history that FWCC has organized such an event, the long weekend saw Friends of many different traditions (liberal, Conservative, pastoral, Evangelical, etc.) come together (in the words of Paddy Lane) "to look deeply into ourselves, examine the roots of our Peace Testimony and the challenges associated with it, and discern corporately how we are called to respond to this present moment of historical crisis." The program included five plenary sessions with 25 presenters and moderators, two workshop sessions offering choices among 28 topics, two "home group" sharing times, an "open space technology" opportunity (spontaneous workshops), daily evening interest group discussions as people were moved, an evening of simple food and fun hosted by New Garden Monthly Meeting, and worship, worship, worship. (Much of the content of the sessions will be available soon on the conference website at www.friendspeace.org.) Full reports from some or all of the seven attenders from NYYM will be available soon. For now, comments from two Friends. First, part of a preliminary report from Paddy Lane:

"The plenary sessions gave us the structure for the weekend. These large sessions, each with an accompanying panel of speakers of varying experiences and backgrounds, spoke to

- the personal experiences of various Friends in spirit-led peacemaking;
- Friends' Biblical and historical experience with the Peace Testimony;

-wrestling with our Peace Testimony—the challenges and changes through the years, the risks required in its fulfillment, and dialogue amongst ourselves about how we best manifest the Peace Testimony;
-what will sustain and strengthen us in the days to come;
-the sessions also addressed visioning where we are headed and empowering us to go forward.

The final plenary session then led directly into our closing worship.

"For myself, the most powerful part of our time together came in our final hours as we began longer worship sessions focused on how we are called at this moment in history. After some consideration of preparing a minute, it was felt that the spirit of the moment would be lost in the struggle to find the appropriate wording, that the issues and actions we are called to address were too vast to be easily encompassed by such a minute. We had heard of risks for peace taken by individuals in trouble spots around the world. We had seen members of the audience rise who had been conscientious objectors in various wars, including young men who have refused to register with the Selective Service. The conference itself took place in a state where Quakers risked everything to witness against slavery at an earlier moment of historical crisis. Our very faith was born at such a time of great upheaval and violence in England. Our best response to this conference is to bring back to our individual meetings a changed life, changed to renew our commitment to all the testimonies of our faith, which together create a fabric that holds up our peace testimony—simplicity, harmony, community, integrity. Do we question whether love can really overcome violence and hate? We must test this within ourselves. Our lives must speak in a way that no written minute or epistle can." And here is a portion of reflections offered by Greg Robie:

"The Conference allowed for openings to occur among multiple perceptions, orientations, and needs. Considered deeply, these openings led to a naming of that which makes us blessed. Mirroring the Beatitudes, our spiritual poverty was named—a good place to be for moving forward. A sense of being overwhelmed and sorrow filled was named—a good place to be to be comforted by something other than denial. Our commitment to non-violence was named—a good condition to have for networking and supporting one another. Our hunger for acting righteously was named—a good orientation and focus for keeping our heart in the heart of God. Acts of conscience (both standing against the life and power of war, and standing with the poor and oppressed) were named—good satisfying disciplines (as well as a means of processing our own shortcomings). Our struggle to have a pure and centered heart in our culture of privilege was named—a good quandary to consider when seeking understanding of our confusion and dilemmas arising when defining - as well as working to participate in - a sustainable culture of peace.

"Personal stories reflected that a life of faith is, as it has always been, a personal choice. The stories showed that among Friends that choice is a disciplined process of discernment. It is a process that is paradoxically both personal and corporate. The spiritual discernment, oversight, and support of ministry are shared tasks. This process links the faith community in a rich variety of opportunities to be faithful, exercise diverse spiritual gifts, and trust the promise that "they that wait upon the Lord will renew their strength, they will mount up with wings as eagles; they will run and not be weary, they will walk and not faint." (Isaiah 40:31)

Ben Richmond, a plenary presenter, suggested "practical" ideas Friends could bring home, including a proposal that every Monthly Meeting sponsor one of its members to be a participant in a short-term or a long-term peace team delegation. One participant from NYYM, in response to an inquiry from a Canadian Friend as to how those in Canada could be helpful, asked whether the time has come to develop an "underground railroad for the 21st century" for those in need of sanctuary from our government's oppression of their civil liberties, conscience and faith. Are these ideas that Friends in NYYM could come together over?

In the weeks ahead, Friends are called to continue our witness for Peace. Among many planned activities are these:

- On Monday, January 27th, 9:00 AM, at the Isaiah Wall in front of the United Nations, 43rd street & 1st Ave, people will gather to urge that the inspections process be allowed to continue. The protest coincides with the report on the inspections to the UN of Chief UN Weapons Inspector Hans Blix. Other activities will occur in the late afternoon.

- On Wednesday, January 29th (the day after the State of the Union address), from 12:00 noon until 6:00 PM, there will be a unified day of local demonstrations in towns and campuses throughout the country to express opposition to war against Iraq. Information on activities in your area is available at <http://www.unitedforpeace.org>.

- New Brunswick Friends Meeting will hold a joint presentation with the Unitarian Society of New Brunswick on Saturday, February 1st from 10:00 AM until Noon on "War Issues, Registration & Conscription". The discussion will center on the current war climate, its implications for mandatory registration with the Selective Service System and a possible military draft and resources for additional counseling. Information or registration (free) is available at 732-246-3113 or usnb@eclipse.net.

- A New York Yearly Meeting worship and action gathering for adults, and programs for young people 6th grade age through high school, will be held on Friday evening and Saturday, February 7 and 8, at Perry City Meetinghouse, near Ithaca.

- United for Peace is organizing a Stop the War March on Saturday, February 15th in New York City to coincide with anti-war demonstrations that are planned in 11 European cities on the same day <www.unitedforpeace.org>.

- Pennsylvania Friends will lead a day of education about, and protest against, the war on Iraq, ("Friends School Day of Peace") on Sunday, February 23rd, at Friends Select School and Friends Center, both in Philadelphia.

- Poplar Ridge Friends are sponsoring a draft counseling workshop on March 1.

- Friends from Farmington-Scipio Region will hold their Spring Gathering on May 16 - 18, on the theme "Quaker Roots of Peace." Attending Friends plan to explore personal leadings, participation in the religious community, and corporate actions that come out of those leadings.

May we continue to pray and act for Peace in every day and with all our faith and body. As proposed at the recent worship and action gathering at Poughkeepsie Meeting,

Friends could engage in corporate worship for world peace while apart at 7:00 AM each morning for five minutes or longer. And Friends may wish to begin preparing to gather for called worship upon the sad occasion of our nation launching war.

Peaceable Greetings,

*Linda Chidsey, Vicki Cooley, Fred Dettmer
NYYM Worship & Action working group*

The first question which the priest and the Levite asked [on the Jericho Road] was: "If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?" But...the good Samaritan reversed the question: "If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?"

Nonviolence is the answer to the crucial political and moral questions of our time: the need for man to overcome oppression and violence without resorting to oppression and violence. Man must evolve for all human conflict a method which rejects revenge, aggression and retaliation. The foundation of such a method is love.

*Martin Luther King Jr., Nobel Prize acceptance speech, Stockholm, Sweden,
December 11, 1964.*

I'd like someone to mention the day that Martin Luther King tried to give his life serving others. I'd like somebody to say that day, that Martin Luther King tried to love somebody. I want you to say that day, that I tried to be right on the war question. I want you to be able to say that day, that I did try to feed the hungry . . . I want you to say that I tried to love and serve humanity. Yes, if you want to say that I was a drum major, say that I was a drum major for justice; say that I was a drum major for peace; I was a drum major for righteousness . . . I want to leave a committed life behind.

I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality. That is why right, temporarily defeated, is stronger than evil triumphant.

I plan to stand by nonviolence, because I have found it to be a philosophy of life that regulates not only my dealings in the struggle for racial justice, but also my dealings with people, and with my own self.

I refuse to accept the view that mankind is so tragically bound to the starless midnight of racism and war that the bright daybreak of peace and brotherhood can never become reality. I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word.

A time comes when silence is betrayal. Even when pressed by the demands of inner truth, men do not easily assume the task of opposing their government's policy, especially in time of war. Nor does the human spirit move without great difficulty against all the apathy of conformist thought within one's own bosom and in the surrounding world....

Some of us who have already begun to break the silence of the night have found that the calling to speak is often a vocation of agony, but we must speak. We must speak with all the humility that is appropriate to our limited vision, but we must speak. For we are deeply in need of a new way beyond the darkness that seems so close around us....

We still have a choice today: nonviolent coexistence or violent coannihilation. We must move past indecision to action. If we do not act, we shall surely be dragged down the long, dark, and shameful corridors of time reserved for those who possess power without compassion, might without morality, and strength without sight.

Now let us begin. Now let us rededicate ourselves in the long and bitter, but beautiful struggle for a new world....

Martin Luther King Jr., April 4, 1967, Riverside Church, New York City