

Peace Concerns Coordinator Report—Summer Sessions 2009

I feel incredibly blessed to be able to continue the relationship between Friends of Tbilisi Friends Worship Group in the Republic of Georgia and New York Yearly Meeting. I am your emissary in this work but both I and Friends in Georgia are clear that it is the work of New York Yearly Meeting!

Let me remind us again how we came to be in relationship with Friends in the Republic of Georgia. At the outbreak of hostilities between Russia and the Republic of Georgia in August of 2008 our general secretary, Christopher Sammond, and our assistant clerk, Heather Cook, sent a letter of support to Tbilisi Friends Worship Group. Friends from the worship group were grateful for our offer of support and they promptly requested that we support them by helping with refugee aid and in bringing conflict transformation skills to their country. This group of Friends, then numbering seven members and seven attenders, had stepped in faith into the work of helping to care for 62,000 refugees and hoped to bring conflict transformation skills to a country torn by war since its birth sometime around 300 BCE. It's an incredible story and touches my heart each time I recount it.

Our Friends in Georgia continue to face significant challenges in the work that they have undertaken with the refugee communities from the Georgian regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia which are now under Russian occupation. While the numbers of these refugees continues to diminish, there are still many living in refugee centers as they await either government housing or subsidies that will allow them to find housing. These refugees lack the bare necessities of food, hygiene products, diapers, children's clothing, etc., and lack funds with which to obtain them. I am pleased to share with you that World Ministries Committee has approved my request for an additional \$1,000 to help with this work.

Tbilisi Friends Worship Group is challenged to find a safe place to have new attenders visit with them and to experience Quaker worship. Their current worship space is in the home of the meeting's clerk, Misha. Misha lives in a small fifth-floor walk-up apartment. This is very difficult for older members. Because of the overwhelming poverty and 80% unemployment in the Republic of Georgia there is a great deal of crime and so, having had his apartment broken

into once, the meeting is not comfortable asking new attenders into Misha's home. As I make plans to travel to the Republic of Georgia this fall and exchange correspondence with Misha, I was asked if it might be possible for New York Yearly Meeting to help with the cost of renting an apartment where they could not only hold meeting for worship, but also conduct AVP workshops and trainings, hold gatherings, and accommodate foreign visitors. Woodbrooke Quaker Study Center, in the UK, is already working at fundraising to help with this endeavor. We have been asked if we might be able to cover four months of rental at a projected cost of \$800. World Ministries Committee has approved this request as well.

My plan has been to return to the Republic of Georgia in September of this year for up to six weeks to begin the work of AVP in workshops and trainings. Friends in Georgia have asked that I postpone this trip until the beginning of 2010 because of an anticipated escalation in political demonstrations at that time. I am not clear that this is a good reason but feel clear to give them ease and to honor their request. As we wait, we will use this additional time to lay a firm foundation for the work that we plan to do. It is my hope to travel with another Friend from NYYM who has strong roots in AVP and a lot of AVP experience.

Each time that I talk with Friends in Georgia they ask that I express their gratitude to you for all of the support you have given them. They are clear that it is not only money that we share but our loving concern and prayers. I am pleased to share with you that, as Friends and attenders of Tbilisi Friends Worship Group have moved forward in faith, doing the work that they believe that they are called to do, they invite others to worship with them and to work with them, and their numbers are growing.

I am grateful for this year's theme: "Equality: living into the testimony." Equality is perhaps the thread that knits together all of our testimonies. It is present as we grapple with questions of Simplicity, and Integrity, and Community, and it is never more present than when we talk about the work of making Peace. As I have moved into the work of peacemaking I have searched for words to begin to define what it is that I strive to do. Here's what I've come to. I believe that the work of peacemaking is a conscious act of Love. A **conscious** act of Love.

That means that I must strive to be as present as I possibly can be to “the problem” as I open my heart to embrace it. I must have some understanding of what it is, what it feels like, to be that other person or group of people. When I’m truly present, I can empathize—I can feel their pain. It is then that I can begin to help the healing process. To be able to do that I need to practice this peacemaking, this conscious act of love, in my every day life as I work to find peace in my heart, and in my home, and in my community. It is in that quiet place within that I begin to understand the struggles—the journey—and, as way opens, I begin to know Peace and with Peace comes incredible Joy. This is where integrity and equality come to the surface. I cannot begin to help someone else to find peace if I have not begun to walk the path myself. I cannot begin to help someone else to find peace unless I have begun to walk the path toward equality—toward a complete acceptance that we are all equal, both oppressed and oppressor, in the eyes of God. You’ve heard me say before, that the true work of making peace begins within ourselves, in our hearts, acknowledging our weaknesses and our failures but also acknowledging that God is with us. We need only believe and be faithful to the leadings of the Spirit, remembering that with God, all things are possible. This is *not* an easy thing. At first, it is fearful and awe-full to resign ourselves to following where God will lead us. I can share with you that in my life, in the times when I have been able to resign myself to the leadings of Spirit, the fruit is good and the Joy beyond anything I’ve ever known. In the end, when I’ve let go of my fear, the fear of outcomes, the fear of my own inadequacy, the fear of the unknown, there is simplicity in listening and doing and incredible community in the loving support of others.

Our world is in dire need of peacemakers. We routinely point to Israel and Palestine, to Sudan and Darfur, to Colombia and Indonesia, to Iran and Iraq and Afghanistan and the Republic of Georgia. All of these places and so many more cry out for peace. I remember the line from a hymn that goes “Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me.” Each of us carries the seeds of peace in our hearts. I hope we’ll all take the time to consciously plant those seeds.

As I’ve carried this concern for peacemaking the testimony of equality has tugged at me from another direction as well. As I look for ways to practice love I am sometimes confronted by the roots of our pain. Many of those roots we have come to acknowledge freely—to talk about openly—things like racism,

sexism, and gender preference. One, in particular, we choose not to talk about—money. As individuals, we choose not to talk about how much or how little money we have, and it is an extremely rare occasion when we openly acknowledge how we use our money.

I want to share with you a little bit of my own experience as a fiscally poor member of New York Yearly Meeting:

When I first became a Friend I was a single parent with three young daughters that I supported by myself. I worked very hard and made a decent salary so I was able to provide the necessities for my family but there was no wiggle room for extras. There was never enough money to do extra things for or with the girls, no dance lessons, no piano lessons, not even sports (there were memberships to pay and uniforms to buy). If I couldn't do anything extra for my kids I certainly wasn't doing anything extra for me. If it couldn't be done for nothing or next to it, it couldn't be done. I shopped for our clothes at the Salvation Army and Kmart not out of choice, but because it was the only way I could afford to clothe us. My criteria for food shopping were simple. It had to be inexpensive. Within the Religious Society of Friends I felt embarrassed and ashamed. I could not afford to participate beyond attending meeting for worship and I was too ashamed to explain why. Now I am fiscally poor because I have chosen to live my life in the simplest fashion possible to free myself to follow a leading to work for peace. Then, I did my best to "pass." Now, I will not. Now, I will speak out because I believe that someone must. We need to be very clear, there are many, many within our yearly meeting who are fiscally poor and many struggling to "pass" just as I did.

Our testimony of Equality touches many, many parts of our lives. I'd like to read you one small paragraph from our *Faith and Practice*:

"Friends invite everyone to participate in corporate fellowship and to share in the vocal ministry in full equality. We encourage a relationship of mutuality between men and women. We continue Friends' witness to work for the rights of women and men to dignity, safety, and political and economic equality." We are teetering on the brink of a long, long conversation about what economic equality looks like and what we can do to get there. I can't begin to tell you what that will mean for each of us as individuals but I do know that when we do

not all have the same level of opportunity, we are *all* diminished. Perhaps we can take guidance from 2 Corinthians 8:3–15 “There is no question of relieving others at the cost of hardship to yourselves; it is a question of equality. At the moment your surplus meets their need, but one day your need may be met from their surplus. The aim is equality; as Scripture has it, ‘The man who got much has no more than enough, and the man who got little did not go short.’”

Fiscally, we are not a community—we are not in communion with one another. There is pain for those who are fiscally poor and therefore cannot participate as they would choose and there is pain for those who are fiscally well off. We are diminished as individuals and we are diminished as a religious society. I believe that peacemaking is a gift that we all share; that it encompasses all that we do and all that we are and all that we are capable of being; and, believing that an act of peacemaking is a conscious act of love, I ask you to hold these queries:

Do Friends seek the most loving way to use the fiscal resources that they hold? Do we consider the plight of the fiscally poor, both near and far, as we hold and use our money? Do we include consideration of our financial resources as we strive to “live in that life and power that takes away the occasion for all war”?

John Woolman, in his *Plea for the Poor*, wrote :

“O that we who declare against wars, and acknowledge our trust to be in God only, may walk in the light, and therein examine our foundation and motives in holding great estates! May we look upon our treasures, the furniture of our houses, and our garments, and try whether the seeds of war have nourishment in these our possessions. Holding treasures in the self-pleasing spirit is a strong plant, the fruit whereof ripens fast. A day of outward distress is coming, and Divine love calls to prepare against it.”

Greta Mickey
NYYM Peace Concerns Coordinator