

General Secretary's Report

Fall Sessions, 2014

15th Street Meetinghouse

This is our first time back together as a community since summer sessions. There, after days of real difficult wrestling with one another, we came to a powerful sense of unity, one which I can still touch back on in my heart. Friends who were there used language such as “a powerful movement of the Spirit,” “a Pentecostal experience,” and “conflict transformation.” While many of us who are here today were present then, many also were not, and I feel a need to perhaps help us bridge back to that time, that energy, that powerful presence of the Spirit aflame in open hearts. I hope we can touch back on that. And I hope that our sessions here, and our work going forward, are tempered by that experience of openness, joy, and spiritual power.

Broadening our context even further, I want to put today's session in the context of the work over the past five years. At Fall Sessions, 2009, we struggled to find any unity at all in framing a budget. The economic downturn of 2008 had taken its toll on the budgets of families, monthly meetings, and the yearly meeting. We were badly stuck, and could not find ourselves clear to approve a budget. At that time, I reported to you my sense of the work before us to avert even worse circumstances. I said that we would need to focus on three areas, Vision, Communication, and Development. I want to report back to you on where we are in that work.

Vision:

We have spent a great deal of time arriving at a common vision, as represented by the Statement of Leadings and Priorities passed by this body with such jubilation at summer sessions. This was due in large part to the incredibly dedicated work of the Priorities Working Group, which listened to every monthly meeting and many of our worship groups, and spent many weekends in discernment as to how to distill and communicate what they had heard.

Now, for the first time in a very long time, I believe we have a unity of vision shared broadly by our monthly meetings and by Friends active in the yearly meeting committee structure. To me, this feels like tender new growth, which must be carefully tended, or it may wither.

At this session, we will have a first reading of the mechanism by which we will hold ourselves accountable to this vision, so that this work does not get shelved, as previous major efforts at bridging the gap between monthly meetings and the yearly meeting organization have been.

Communication:

The Communications Committee met on retreat and revised our communications structure and strategy, for both internal communication and how we communicate with the wider world. We worked to redefine the role of Communications Director, hired Steve Davison, and empowered him to work from his leading to bring our communications into the digital age. We have set up a process for press releases, and are

now routinely sending those out. Steve is virtually done revamping our website. We started the practice of sending out a “Year in Review,” which highlights the work done by us as a yearly meeting in the broadest sense of that term. We now have facebook and twitter accounts. Steve has created an extensive resource section of the website, on most aspects of our faith and our practice as Friends. Do check it out.

There is more work to do, but a huge amount has been done. We are reviewing how effective Info Share is for internal communication. We need to get better at communicating effectively at a grassroots level about the work done across the yearly meeting, by our committees, by our monthly meetings, and by individual Friends. But we have come a huge distance from where we were five years ago.

Development:

We first explored the idea of a development effort with a Development Working Group. After those Friends spent about a year getting clear that we should have a development effort, and what that should look like, we created a Development Committee, which is at the beginning of its third year of service. It is a huge amount of work to create a development program *ex nihilo*, and the work of this committee has been slow and careful as it has gone about this task. Some serving on the committee expressed reservations about the challenging work of asking individuals for contributions. What we have found is that offering Friends an opportunity to support something they care about heart and soul is often a blessing for all concerned. We have been surprised at how many Friends there are who are happy to do what they can to support the work of this yearly meeting. As a result, a growing number of Friends contributing directly to the operating budget have increased their collective contribution by 50% each of the past two years.

In summary, we have been doing the work we set out to do. We have done a great deal, and there is still some more to do. But having done this work, we are now in a more stable position than we were before, and more capable of offering mutual support across our monthly meetings, and our witness to the world. I find us ready to dig in and move, and present to the question as to what might God be calling us to do, which was the theme of last summer session. Some of the answer to that question will be in how we implement the Statement of Leadings and Priorities. And some will be in areas yet to be discerned.

It is my profound hope that we can move into that question with unity, joy, strength, and the power of the Spirit.

Christopher Sammond
General Secretary