

General Secretary's Report

April 2010

At Fall Sessions last year, we struggled to find clarity on how to fund the work underway at a yearly meeting level. As we did so, words like “vision,” “mission,” “priorities,” and “support” were prevalent. We formed an ad hoc committee to look at “who we are, how we are led, and how we support the work of those leadings and needs.” In the first meeting of that group, one Friend who had also served on the Ad Hoc Committee on the Function of the Yearly Meeting made

an interesting observation. She noted that while we were, ten years later, looking at some similar questions, the context was completely different. At that time, that committee was addressing concerns about how to regenerate life in the Yearly Meeting. She observed that now we have so much going on that we are struggling to prioritize and fund it. In many ways, we have succeeded ourselves into a whole different set of problems. This is actually cause for some celebration.

I saw an article the other day about the upside of a down economy being that it forces us to look at our values and our direction. I see our nation as a whole wrestling with those questions, and most non-profits looking quite hard at issues of vision and mission—who we are, what we are called to do, and how to get there. Many of our monthly meetings have been engaging those questions, and I see us as a body doing the same, pausing at a crossroads, seeking direction. We are in a new place. We have settled. We have deepened as a community. We are readying for the next chapter. How do we move into that future with conscious intention? We have been pushed to do so partly by economics. But I think we need to be doing that work regardless of economics, and I am glad we are doing it.

In the past five years, we have grown significantly in the work we are trying to support and be faithful to. As we have added new things, little by little, one at a time, it has been easy to lose track of how much has changed. As we pause at this crossroads, I think it is helpful to realize just how much we have grown. Here are just some of those new initiatives:

- YFIR—the Young Friends in Residence Program
- ARCH—Aging Resources Consultation and Help
- Significant growth in prison ministry, from supporting new prison worship groups to greater collaboration with the Alternatives to Violence Project and the American Friends Service Committee, to engaging more intentionally with the NYS Department of Correctional Services, to creating a response team to support incarcerated Friends dealing with medical crises or those who are dying
- Meetings for Discernment
- After laying down the Religious Education Committee, the Spiritual Nurture Working Group, Task Group on Youth, and then the Youth Committee and the First Day School Working Group all arose to address this crucial work.
- We have improved *Spark*, expanded and improved *InfoShare*, and constructed a new Web site.
- We have begun addressing the work of college outreach.
- We restructured the Coordinating Committee on Ministry and

Counsel, creating a more effective working body addressing the spiritual life of our community.

- We started offering programs for our youth at Spring and Fall Sessions.
- The Circle of Young Friends has become considerably more active, with greater attendance at Summer Sessions, a dynamic Young Adult Concerns Committee, and greater interest in being an integral part of the life of this Yearly Meeting.
- The Committee on Conscientious Objection to Military Taxation has been doing dynamic work.
- We created a project-based budget, enhancing understanding of how Friends' money is spent in support of the work of the Yearly Meeting.
- We completely revised the *Personnel Handbook*.
- As a body, we have engaged in significant witness against torture, war, and immoral recruitment practices.
- We totally revamped our auditing system.
- We have supported Friends' witness in Indonesia and the Republic of Georgia.
- We began having singing weekends twice a year, which have drawn Friends from across the Yearly Meeting, joining hearts as we join in song.
- The gatherings of the Friends in the Spirit of Christ group have expanded, welcoming Friends from other yearly meetings to its annual gathering.

We have added a lot. And all of these new initiatives have required varying amounts of staff time to get them up and running, and/or to provide administrative support on an ongoing basis. So we have increased program without increasing the total number of staff hours. In fact, this year we reduced the communications director position by 20%. (This was not due to the economy, but because, given other priorities for staff, I could not justify one full time equivalent [FTE] for communication in a staff of only 3.5 FTEs. I had hoped to use the savings from the reduction of the communications director position to provide much needed staff support for Young Adult Friends. Unfortunately, we had to use those savings to close the budget gap this year.)

As we as a body continue to expand program, and I believe that we will, we will need to be more and more creative with staff time. Your staff and the Communications Committee are looking at how to streamline production of *Spark*, and the new Web site should be less labor-intensive, allowing us a further reduction in the commu-

nications director position. And Helen Gary Toppins and I continue to look for ways in which volunteers can do some of the work now done by staff.

Our treasurer will be bringing us some very good news. Despite a difficult economy, we were able to close the year in the black. This was due to the staunch support of our monthly meetings and to our being extremely careful with expenses, significantly under-spending our budget. In a time when many of our monthly meetings were struggling to make budget, they chose to honor their commitment to support the Yearly Meeting. I am deeply grateful for that.

We are at a pivotal time in the Society of Friends. Many of the institutions that sustain our wider society are really struggling. Some examples: *Friends Journal* has raised serious questions about being able to continue. AFSC had to cut its budget in half last year, and laid off many staff, including closing the Syracuse office. FGC has laid off staff. Philadelphia Yearly Meeting has laid off staff. FCNL has laid off 25% of its staff. In May, Great Plains Yearly Meeting will be looking at whether or not to lay itself down. Pendle Hill is struggling. FUM, operating with a skeleton crew for several years, began a restructuring retreat last fall with the question of whether or not to lay the organization down.

If *Friends Journal* closes, it will be a loss for all of us. If FUM is laid down, we will all be the less for it. Laying down Somerset Hills is a loss for all of us. We might not feel the change, the loss, right away, but when part of what nurtures our collective life has been lost, it impacts all of us.

We are one body. Different parts nurture the whole. This is not empty rhetoric, but what I see every day. I see how Friends grow in their service to FGC, FUM, AFSC, etc, and then bring those skills back in service of their monthly meetings. I learned how to clerk by watching excellent clerking at FGC's Central Committee. At a recent retreat at Powell House, I met two women who were new to Friends. Each had come to Friends because her child had attended a Friends school, and now they are regular attenders. Some of our most active young adult Friends were nurtured by Friends high schools. The two strongest meetings in Long Island Quarter are associated with Friends Schools. Most of the Friends active in the Spiritual Nurture Working Group were nurtured by School of the Spirit. Powell House, Pendle Hill, and Earlham nurture many of our Friends, rekindling their spiritual fires, giving them much to share with their monthly, regional, and yearly meetings. I have initiated sharing some ideas on development from New England Yearly Meeting with Financial Services and a whole-meeting approach to conflict developed in Philadelphia Yearly

Meeting with our Conflict Transformation Committee. Other yearly meetings here and in Europe are taking careful note of what we are doing with Meetings for Discernment. A peace curriculum developed by Friends from Western Yearly Meeting and Northwest Yearly Meeting is going to be used in elementary and secondary schools in Kenya. We are connected.

We are all interconnected, in one Society. We advance, or we don't, as a whole. As we pause at this crossroads time, I think that part of our work will be to look at how we as individual Friends are supporting our Society as a whole. How much do we want to support that? If we really believe that Friends work in the world is a treasure, part of the solution to what besets this ailing world, don't we want, as Woolman said, "To turn all the treasures we possess into the channels of universal love..."? Most of us, myself included, are a long ways from that. I think we need to look at that, particularly now. Balancing our budget at the expense of the wider Religious Society is a short-sighted solution. If we treasure this Society, of which we have been entrusted a small part, we need to support it.

And while these are certainly hard times, and likely to get harder, I do not believe that our difficulty with budget is due to a lack of funds or a down economy. The economy has merely focused our attention on a problem we have been living with for some time. We still lack a unity of vision, a vision that individual Friends can get behind and want to passionately support. When we have that, I have no doubt about our clarity, even our joyful clarity, to support that vision with all the time, talent and treasure we have at our disposal.

I was recently talking with a Friend about the condition of our Yearly Meeting. She asked how I saw our condition. I said that I saw us at a place of decision, one where we would need to decide upon whether we would put our energies into maintaining what is, or worse yet, trying to recreate what was, or if we would be willing to step into the stream of where we are being called to. There is little life or power in maintaining; even less in recreating. If we are to be faithful, to grow, we must be willing to step into the vision that God has already prepared for us, which we have not yet seen. May we have the courage and wisdom to do so.

POST SCRIPT: Our Clerk has asked Friends who were charged with certain duties over the past five years to report back to the body on how we executed those charges. Some years ago, then Clerk Ernie Buscemi and I were charged with the task of taking the concern of Meeting the Minimum Needs of All to the wider world, Quaker and otherwise. We soon became clear that asking the two busiest Friends in the Yearly Meeting to address a task as vast as this was not a good

model to proceed from. We also felt that if the Yearly Meeting as a whole were really to engage with this work, it needed to be owned more fully in the body, supported more broadly. We suggested that Witness Coordinating Committee take this under their care, and they were clear to do so. There is a task group addressing this work under their care.