

General Secretary's Report

Fall Sessions, 2015

The following is a written version of an oral report I gave at Fall Sessions. As I only became clear as to what I was led to share at about 4:00 am that morning, I did not have time to season it well. I have added some things which were missing in the oral report, and which I am clear to include here.

Christopher Sammond

In my first two or three years serving NYYM, when visiting meetings, I would invariably ask “What do you think a yearly meeting is for? I would hear a pretty consistent response, that it was to help monthly meetings do what they could not do on their own, and to be a representative entity in the wider body of Friends and in the world.

More recently, the Priority Working Group traveled around the yearly meeting asking some pretty similar questions, and got a fuller, more nuanced response, but one which is pretty much in keeping with what I heard years ago.

In both cases, what the words “New York Yearly Meeting” referred to was very ambiguous; different Friends meant very different things when they said those words. Some Friends meant the committee structure, some meant the staff and office, some meant those who gather at summer sessions. In rarer circumstances, some were referring to all the Friends who gather in worship across our entire geography. I think we need to be clearer with each other as to what these words mean. So, to clarify:

What is New York Yearly Meeting? We Are:

- About 4000 Friends, members and attenders, worshipping regularly in NY, NJ, and CT
- About 85 MMs and WGs
- Over 250 volunteers serving on many committees, supporting all of us and our common work
- A staff of six Friends, working both full-time and part-time, out of our office in NYC, and from several home offices
- A gathering of 500-750 Friends who gather at summer sessions each year

We are all of this.

And yet, we are something more, or at least we are called to be. We are called to be *a people*, called to be *a body*. There is great power in that, and we need the strength and spiritual power which come from living out that spiritual reality in our corporate life. And we are called to the common work of creating the Beloved Community, the Kingdom of God, the Reign of justice and love. We are not here to perpetuate our monthly meetings or the yearly meeting as institutions, or to try to preserve Quakerism per se. Our work is much bigger than that. We need to not lose sight of that.

Part of how I understand my work is that in traveling around and witnessing what is going on in our meetings, and being in touch with the work done through our committee structure, I get a sense of our condition as a whole, and then reflect that back. And I would say

that at this time, we seem to be at some kind of watershed moment, a turning point. I am witnessing a lot of new life and vitality. Some of this new life includes:

- The Outreach Roundtable held at Shrewsbury meetinghouse, where 26 Friends from 18 meetings came to learn about and share best practices in doing local outreach
- We had our first Youth institute, lifting up a multi-generational approach to youth programming and teaching skills to Friends involved in First Day Schools
- We have launched the Tending the Garden workshop series for monthly, quarterly and regional meetings, interwoven with retreats at Powell House
- We are supporting a wealth of witness initiatives, including AVP in the New Jersey prisons, AVP camp for undocumented teenagers, vibrant earthcare witness, anti-racism work, prison ministry, and more
- The Advancement Committee is supporting a workshop designed to help MMs do effective local outreach work
- There is a heartening level of financial support for the yearly meeting operating budget, from both meetings and individuals. I consider this a valuable feedback loop; Friends are letting us know we are doing the right things.
- Some Friends are exploring how to use marketing tools borrowed from the secular world to share the truths we have found in our Quaker practice
- We are beginning the practice of multi-year budgeting for the operating budget
- We are recreating the YM website
- We are working to create a staff position supporting children, youth and young families taking better root in our local meetings
- Many meetings are welcoming new members and attenders

We are indeed turning some kind of corner here. It is hard to know cause and effect relative to the Statement of Leadings and Priorities and the individual and combined efforts and leadings of Friends. I believe that to be something of a chicken and egg sort of question. But regardless of cause or causes, as a community we are moving assertively into greater Light.

What I know, in terms of both individuals and communities, is that greater Light also begins to make more visible things previously obscured in the shadows, the parts of ourselves we don't know, don't want to recognize, or don't want to own. Early Friends knew this capacity of the Light to illuminate parts of ourselves we need to face, anticipated it, and wrote about it. And as Mary Kay Glazer illustrated in her Bible Hours at summer sessions last year, journeying through those shadow places results in a stronger and deeper community. It leads us closer to the Beloved Community we are called to help birth.

So I am not fearful of the intimations I have of us moving not only into greater Light, but also towards that which prevents us from living into even greater Light. Both are opportunities, and I think we have built the capacity to move into both, confident in the strength of our community and the depth of our practice.

Christopher Sammond