

A Brief Update on Changes in Friends United Meeting

A report from NYYM General Secretary and NYYM Representative
to the FUM General Board Christopher Sammond, March 2016

It has been years since NYYM's representatives to the Friends United Meeting (FUM) board have reported to the body of the yearly meeting about the state of FUM or its work, aside from our Advance Reports., Questions coming to me from monthly meetings as one of our reps to the FUM General Board made it clear to me that most of our monthly meetings were lacking some pretty important background information as they labored over how to respond to Brooklyn Monthly Meeting's minute. I hope that the following fills some of those gaps.

I first began serving as an NYYM representative to the FUM General Board in 2005. At that time, and through at least 2008, the board could have been characterized as deeply polarized, conflictual, tense, and trying to find some way forward. The main flash point, though not the only one, was the sexual ethics portion of the personnel policy. The polarization on this issue was so great that meaningful laboring together over it was truly impossible.

The polarization was due, in no small part, to twenty years of strenuous advocacy on the part of the representatives from New York, New England, Baltimore, Canadian, and Southeast yearly meetings, which unfortunately was often tinged with a sense of judgement and self-righteous indignation. On the other side of the divide, Friends from the Orthodox yearly meetings were internally divided on how to understand and value LGBT personhood and ministry, and were trying to use FUM as a proxy battleground to work out what could only be worked out in their own yearly meetings. It was a mess.

Especially in 2007-8, the board was so polarized that I did not see even the remotest possibility of us truly engaging with hearts and minds open to the will of God. Friends from the liberal yearly meetings, seeing that their advocacy was heightening the polarization, chose to stay engaged, while continuing to bear witness to our understanding of the gifts of Queer Friends in ways that were less combative. At the same time, we were clear to share our gifts in furthering the work of FUM in East Africa, Palestine, and elsewhere.

In the years following those turbulent times, the Orthodox yearly meetings have been sorting through their own disunity on the issue of how to understand and value Queer Friends. Western Yearly Meeting went through deep chaos and division, with eight or more churches leaving the yearly meeting. Indiana Yearly Meeting split over this issue. North Carolina Yearly Meeting is now facing its own internal divisions, with the outcome of that laboring still unclear. As these yearly meetings have wrestled with their own internal disharmony, it has taken considerable pressure off of FUM as an organization.

Now, after some years of less conflictual witness on the issue of participation of Queer Friends in the life of FUM, there are and have been any number of openly Queer Friends serving in positions of key leadership on the board, such as clerks of key committees and on Nominating. Their presence and the gifts of their service have slowly and subtly changed attitudes on the North American side of the FUM board. Within the

culture of the North American board, Queer Friends have been embraced with warmth and candor. The changes have been profound, and are continuing.

Does this mean that I believe it is time to once again engage in more overt laboring over this issue, or that there is a possibility of getting the FUM organization to change it's written policy in the near future? I would say no, for several reasons. For one, Friends on the board are still too deeply divided on this issue to make headway. It is overtly stated in the FUM personnel manual that Friends do not have unity on this issue. I expect that it may take many more years before open-hearted laboring in the Spirit will be possible. Like the history of Friends taking close to a century to come to unity about slavery, I believe that it will take gentle, loving persuasion over more than a generation to see that kind of a sea-change.

For another, FUM is a global organization. The East African branch of the General Board is the product of a deeply homophobic culture. Change there will take a very long time. Yet I can already see changes happening. Some of the openly Queer Friends who attended the FWCC World Gathering in Kenya are being asked to come back to share from their experience with Kenyan Friends. There are the very beginnings of threads of dialogue happening there.

In the period of 2007-2009, this yearly meeting looked at the option of ending our association with the rest of FUM. Ultimately, we were clear not to do so. We chose to stay on for a variety of reasons, among them, in order to effect change through maintaining a presence "at the table," and to support work of peace-building, education, and eradication of poverty—the creation of "The Blessed Community"—that FUM furthers. That choice has been bearing good fruit; slow change is happening in what will undoubtedly be a very long process.

Perhaps we as a body can no longer bear the pain and distress the FUM personnel policy touches in us, and we will see clear to end our association. Or, we may be clear to pursue a more aggressive type of advocacy. Personally, I would not recommend either of those options. I hope that this update on the broader context within which we must weigh those options will be helpful to Friends.

Christopher Sammond
NYYM Representative to the FUM General Board